

Online Summer Institute: Extending the Invitation

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Overview of Morehead Writing Project

Since 1986, the Morehead Writing Project at Morehead State University has served public and private school teachers in eastern Kentucky. Our teacher-consultants mostly live and work in the 22-county service area located on the edge of the Daniel Boone National Forest, the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Our topography is marked by steep mountains and narrow valley passes, and our population is plagued by chronic poverty, unemployment, and low life expectancy. In this environment, our work to empower our teachers and students through thinking, writing, and leading is vital.

Over the 32-year legacy of our site, the vision and mission of our site remains unchanged: the best teacher of writing is a teacher who writes. In that way, the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) is not merely professional development, but a life changing experience that challenges participants' pedagogy and practice in profound ways. And even though we've kept our eyes on the mission of empowering teachers and students, our site's programming has responded to the realities of our region and the need for digital learning options for our teachers. Our awareness also of a larger instructional sea change lead to the creation of the Online Summer Institute (OSI).

We recently completed our 8th OSI with 15 teachers. Half of them were from our service area; the other half from all over the United States. Kentucky teacher Jessica Davis sums up the experience in her final reflection: *"The weeks have been so brief but so valuable. I am happy to have been part of this experience. I had such reservations about this course but am glad I didn't shy away. I want my students to write and share with boldness so I must do that in order to show them how. I am thankful for what I am taking away from here: renewed confidence in own work, boldness to share even about things that are painful, and many great and exciting lessons to incorporate in my classroom. It has been a worthwhile experience."*

If you are reading this monograph, your site may be thinking about launching an online summer institute, considering ways to offer a hybrid institute or looking to improve your own hybrid offering. We invite you to read our story about how this new

wrinkle has become so indispensable to the important work we do. This monograph is not a protocol, but an invitation to peer over the shoulders of our director and the leadership team who developed and refined a vibrant and sustainable online community of writing teachers.

We understand your concerns about community because we had those same concerns at the launch. We understand your concerns about the barriers of technology because we tried several different tech platforms before we found just the right house for comfort and utility for our unique context. It is our hope that this monograph will answer both your philosophical and practical questions and support the National Writing Project's mission to provide new pathways for educators who are connected in their commitment to authentic writing instruction.

Overview of Invitational Summer Institute

In order to situate our OSI in the context of our site work, it is important to understand the traditional MWP summer institute framework. The MWP ISI is planned and executed in three stages:

Pre - ISI

The MWP ISI leadership team is created intentionally to represent the K-16 spectrum. Each year our site leadership team reviews our ISI leadership team to find a balance of strengths, personalities, and expertise. Once the ISI leadership team is selected, they meet to update the application, orientation materials, and our [ISI handbook](#).

From November to February, our site publicizes the ISI through social media and e-mails to potential fellows. In late February, interested teachers complete the online application, stating their reasons for applying and their experiences with writing instruction.

In March the ISI leadership team reviews the applications and invites teachers to interview. The leadership team interviews three or four applicants at one time. Each applicant brings a writing lesson and shares it at the interview. The team looks for three things: 1) a desire and a passion for personal and professional growth, 2) a willingness to embrace best practices about writing, and 3) a capacity to represent our site in the future. After all candidates are interviewed, the leadership team invites the participants to the orientation held in May. At the orientation, the new fellows watch demos from the outgoing fellows and any fears or concerns they may have about the institute are addressed. The expectation is that all fellows will complete the following:

- one personal piece of writing
- one professional piece of writing,
- one piece of their choice,
- one inquiry project by the end of the fourth follow-up session in May

During ISI

At the outset of the ISI, which takes place over three weeks in June, our goal is to build community and set the tone. To make that happen, the leadership teams sets the stage for community by bringing breakfast for the fellows, leading fellows in a “Start the Day off Write” prompt, sharing their own writing, and modeling how to transcribe the daily ethnography. The participants and leaders tweet lines from the share out that resonate with them which will be used in that day’s ethnography collected on Storify. The leadership team also closes each day with a share-out to reflect on the highlights of the day.

Week 1

Teachers build community and model demos during the first week of the ISI. The ISI leadership team and rock stars from past ISI’s share demos with the new fellows. This modeling process eases the incoming fellows’ concerns about doing their own demos the following week. After each demo, the group talks about how the lesson can be adapted to

the various grade levels and content areas represented in the room, and fellows share feedback on index cards with presenters. The leadership team invites fellows to lunch during the institute in hopes of increasing social interaction after the institute is over. The afternoon is dedicated to sacred writing time. By the end of the first week, the fellows are growing as writers and reflective practitioners.

Week 2

During the second week, the ISI leaders shift a lot of responsibilities to the fellows. The fellows bring breakfast, create the ethnography, and present demos. Additionally, fellows form writing groups, and the leaders participate in those writing groups to demonstrate effective feedback. As the week progresses and community builds, the new fellows provide more feedback on their own. This builds confidence in their ability to give effective feedback and models the peer review process we want them to take back to their classrooms.

Week 3

The final week of the ISI continues in much the same way as the previous two weeks. By this point, many fellows have crafted a personal piece and are seeking a lot of feedback. The last week we discuss the required professional piece and the expectations for the classroom inquiry project which they will execute as action research in their classrooms in the fall.

Post ISI

The fellows attend four follow-up sessions during the academic year after their summer institute:

- Follow-up Session #1 takes place in late August/early September at our site's Fall Writing Retreat. This allows the new fellows to reconnect with one another and refresh their passion for writing.

- Follow-up Session #2 takes place at MWP's annual Writing Eastern Kentucky (WEKY) conference in November where each fellow leads a session. This allows the teachers to flex their new teacher as leader muscle and gives them a professional opportunity.
- Follow-up Session #3 takes place in March at Morehead State University and is a final opportunity for the fellows to receive additional support for their inquiry projects.
- Follow-up Session #4 usually takes place in conjunction with the orientation for incoming fellows. This is the final meeting for the outgoing fellows. They share their projects with the new incoming fellows as audience. This allows our fellows completing the program to demonstrate their new role as teacher consultants and ambassadors for the Morehead Writing Project.

The Spark

The Morehead Writing Project first experimented with an Online Summer Institute in 2011 as a solution to three problems.

First, Eng 608 and Eng 609 (the Morehead State University graduate classes formally associated with the ISI) had low enrollments. We had moved away from requiring all fellows to register for any graduate credit hours because we wanted to encourage teachers at all points in their careers to apply to the writing project - not just new teachers still working on their masters. Our host institution, due to budget constraints, was not willing to pay our site director for classes under cap.

Secondly, and most importantly, teachers simply could not commit to a physical presence for three weeks on the MSU campus. Anyone who knows teachers knows their summers are often filled with a litany of professional obligations including specific training and professional development required to do their full-time jobs as well as

additional coaching and second jobs. Family obligations also often make it difficult for some educators to commit to the traditional ISI.

Lastly, our service region is rural Eastern Kentucky so many of the communities can not access our campus easily. There are no nice four-lane highways to large sections of our service region, but rather narrow winding roads threatened by mudslides, coal trucks, and wandering cattle.

Our site director was a strong proponent for offering an online summer institute, because she believed in online education and knew from her experience it could be just as powerful as more traditional professional development and education opportunities.

“When I began my career at Morehead State University in 2001, I taught night classes full of non-traditional students who were often forgoing sleep and family time to travel long distances to attend class. That led me to begin looking into alternatives to the traditional class. I proposed, developed, and taught MSU’s first online general education writing classes in 2004 and quickly learned that there were many advantages to online education,” said Dr. Mascle.

Just prior to stepping in as site director for the Morehead Writing Project, Mascle entered an online Ph.D. program at Texas Tech in 2008.

“My TTU experience was one of the best educational opportunities of my life. There was no set protocol for our instructors to use although most classes did involve at least an hour of synchronized discussion each week.”

During her doctoral work, Mascle experienced a variety of platforms and formats used in online education.

“The other students and I quickly developed backchannel platforms for conversations using social media. Those social media connections replicated the social interactions we would have had in the hallway during class breaks and we even set up informal meetups similar to those we might have had in bars or coffee shops. All these interactions meant that I bonded closely with my own cohort as well as members of cohorts well ahead or behind my own,” said Mascle.

With the three needs that faced our site and with the spark of these two positive online experiences, our site recognized that the best of online education could be replicated as a vibrant professional development offering.

Overview of the Online Summer Institute

Let's break down the online version of an online writing institute, looking at its unique combination of traditional elements and online functionality.

Pre - OSI

The planning for the OSI is similar to the preparation for the ISI. The site leadership updates the resources, structure, recruitment of participants, and moderator selection. In addition to being an open institute, the OSI is also an [asynchronous platform](#) which means there's never an obligation to be in front of the computer with the other community members at the same time, and participants have many different access points to the community throughout the institute. A week before the OSI starts, participants receive an [email](#) from our site director telling them to:

- ❖ create [a Google account](#) if they don't already have one
- ❖ join our MWP OSI Google + community and become familiar with the category pages, which serve as both an archive of work and a classification system for the posts
- ❖ become familiar with the [OSI Handbook](#), which is a static Google site we update annually, that houses the five major components of our OSI experience: [Community](#), [Writer](#), [Reflective Practitioner](#), [Researcher](#), and [Leader](#).
- ❖ become familiar with the practice, presentation, and assessment expectations in the OSI Course Plan
- ❖ begin reading Patricia Schneider's *Writing Alone and With Others* and begin writing from any of the prompts Schneider offers

Participant Recruitment

While the ISI and OSI share many similarities, one way in which they differ is recruitment and selection of participants. While the ISI leadership team carefully vets teachers to insure a good balance of personalities in the room, the OSI has no such concerns. We publicize our offering through social media, MSU's graduate program, and direct mailings to administrators and teachers in our region. Because a teacher can take the OSI for either graduate hours or professional development credit, our participants fall into two categories: teachers who pay a \$300 registration fee (often reimbursed by their school district) for professional development credit and teachers pursuing a MA degree in the online graduate program at Morehead State University. Our graduate student participants are often out-of-state while our professional development participants are mostly in-state, although those are not exclusive assignments. Because we are an open institute, neither group needs to apply or interview; if they register or pay the fee, they are in.

This lack of a vetting process has raised concern at our site. Although this openness results in a more diverse group than we typically see in an ISI, we have found that the common ground of improving our practice combined with our deliberate [community building](#) makes this concern a non-issue.

Leadership Selection

The OSI and the ISI are similar in selection of their leadership team. We choose leaders that represent the K-16 spectrum. Because the OSI is offered as an online graduate class through Morehead State University, our site director serves as both the instructor of record and the point person for all initial communication with the participants. Typically, depending on enrollment, two teacher-consultants who have formerly attended the ISI are selected to serve as moderators within the online class.

The moderators have four main responsibilities: to build community by sharing their personal and professional writing early in the institute, to model professional online discussion protocols, to provide in-depth feedback to writing, and to troubleshoot any technical difficulties the participants may experience.

If you have a large group of participants, we have found it's helpful for the leadership team to select and shepherd specific participants, so that no post is left behind. For community building, it's important that everyone is heard, seen, and supported. In an online community, leader responsiveness is key to that sense of inclusion. If a participant posts something and no one comments, he could assume that his work was not important or was not valuable, when in actuality, the post was lost in the multiple threads that are floating in any particular tab.

When a moderator or another participant comments on a thread, it bumps the post to the top of feed. The OSI moderators vigilantly check in with their assigned participants daily and weekly. We've found that creating a spreadsheet of participants to use as a daily check-in is very important to the continuity and community of the online work we do.

During OSI

Our OSI runs concurrent with Morehead State's four-week Summer I term, typically held in June. However, because the OSI is not built on synchronous meetings, our "weeks" look very different from the ISI even though the work and the output is the same. Where the ISI is driven by time and place, the OSI operates independent of those considerations. While we have the same goals and do the same work as the ISI, the OSI participants can work at their own pace, choosing their own path through the modules. However, they do need to complete their work by the end of the Summer I term.

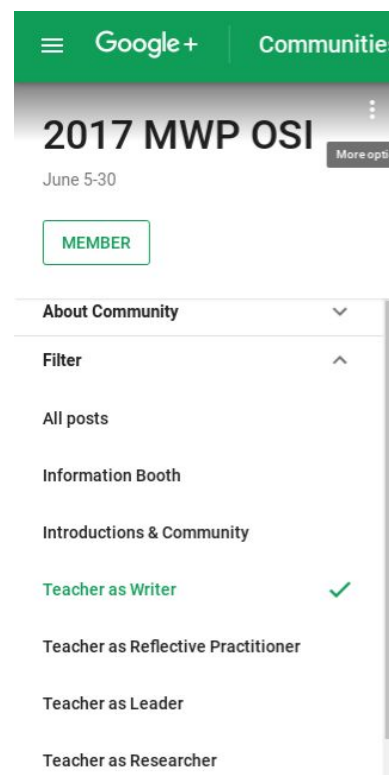
Just like the ISI, our first goal is to build community and set the tone for our work together. In the first three days, we provide multiple opportunities for OSI participants to develop strong bonds through writing. The leaders model vulnerability

and openness by sharing personal writing in progress or lessons or questions they are currently studying. They introduce themselves to the OSI through the use of [Six Word Stories](#) and [Me Museums](#), which can be posted as a Prezi, PowToons, Google Slides, Flipsnack book, TES mashup or any other viable presentation platform that uses visuals and text to create a digital story. And they are also writing a lot and posting their starts, talking to each other, sharing their lives, their jobs, their worlds with each other. This modeling sets the tone.

Because the OSI is asynchronous, we organize our work through categories in the Google+ platform.

It makes sense to break down the assignments in the OSI by these categories instead of by the work completed weekly as in the ISI. The categories, as shown above, are:

[Information Booth](#), [Introductions & Community](#), [Teacher as Writer](#), [Teacher as Reflective Practitioner](#), [Teacher as Instructional Leader](#), [Teacher as Researcher](#), and [Cabinet of Curiosities](#).



Information Booth

This category tab serves two purposes: participants can ask general questions here and the leadership team can post housekeeping items. This category houses, for example, a [completion checklist](#) participants can use to track their work as well as the Kentucky Writing Project Post-Institute survey. We also post invitations to other site events, such as our seasonal writing retreats and our annual writing conference at MSU.

In the traditional ISI, we attend to housekeeping details at the beginning of the day, before we break for lunch, and before we close the day with our community share-out. In the OSI, these housekeeping details are addressed in our Information

Booth. However, the most important purpose of this space is to address the questions and concerns that pop up throughout the community about technology challenges and the ongoing work. These questions range from how to apply text wrapping to a spreadsheet to confirmations about where to post final work.

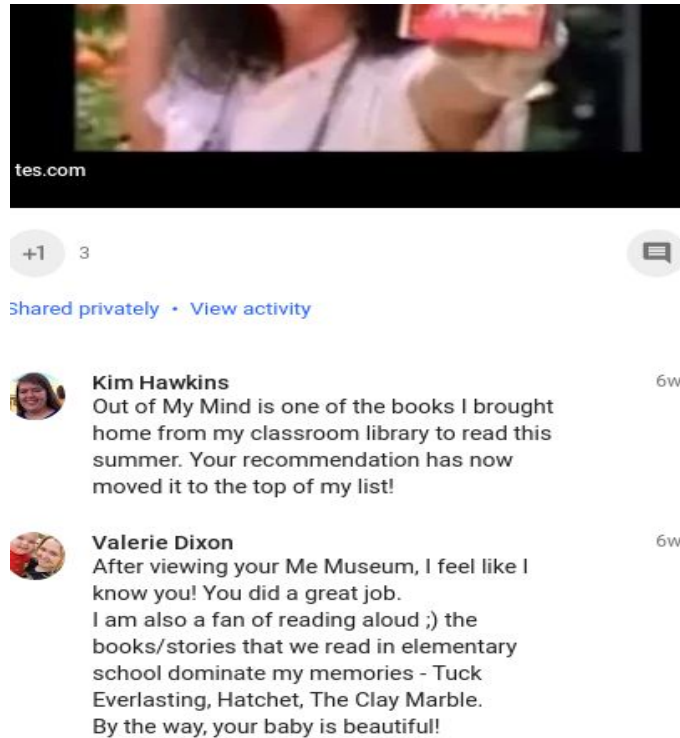
Introductions & Community

In this tab, participants post their introductions and their reflections of the work they are doing. One of the most important sections in the whole Google+ platform, this is where participants share the personal details of their daily lives.

Many teachers who have gone through the ISI report that their pedagogy was challenged and transformed more by the conversations they had at breakfast and lunch than anything that happened in the institute proper. This tab is where those analogous online connections take place. This tab creates the same community because participants are sharing their lives, their values, and their work with one another.

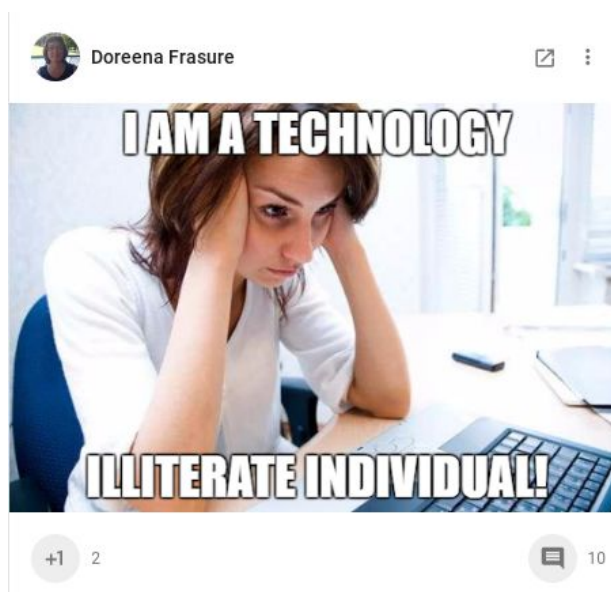
OSI leaders upload their digital Six Word Stories and Me Museums prior to the start of the OSI. These short presentations serve two purposes. First, they serve as models to help participants understand the expectations for their projects. Second, it allows the class to get to know each other differently than they can in most online classes.

While there are many digital tools available that could be used, our site likes the mashup tool [TES](#) because it allows the participants some creative flexibility in how they share information and their life stories. We have found that bonds form quickly for two reasons. First, each presentation can be viewed as many times as needed and returned to again and again. Second, the OSI participants comment on each other's Me Museums often noting connections, similarities, or shared interests. These secondary posts branch into conversations about life, family, and personal interests.



Screenshot of community building comments being made about a participant's Me Museum.

Participants are also asked to create Six Word Stories and add them to a meme. These allow the community members to get creative, reveal aspects of their personalities, and demonstrate a powerfully engaging low stakes writing activity they can take back to their classrooms if they so choose.



Example of a Six Word Memoir Meme

Anyone wishing to start an OSI in Google + should be aware that the streaming of the posts in each tab can be confusing if you have never used the tool. Newest entries always post to the top of the tab. Because

of this, comments are not always equally spread out among the presentations. However, similar issues often happens in our ISI when a participant shares their Me Museum just before lunch and so the last person delivering their presentation gets fewer comments. Each platform has its strengths and its weaknesses, but our OSI has effectively created deep personal and professional connections effectively over the years.

As part of their Community responsibilities, participants are charged to pay it forward three times for every post. This means that every time a participant posts a piece, from a writing start to a pedagogical reflection, they must pay it forward by commenting on three other posts in that category.

Teacher as Writer

In this tab, participants post their writing. Just like our ISI's "Start the Day off Write" activity, we ask our participants to start a piece of writing each day of the week during the OSI. While the ISI offers up only one prompt each day, OSI participants have several options. The facilitators post prompts in this tab, Schneider's book offers a variety of writing prompts, or participants select their own prompts that they found elsewhere. Participants share at least six responses to prompts with the class, but they often post many more. Writing in this category this year ranged from found poetry, tankas, narratives, slam poetry, flash fiction, essays on relationships, and meditations on old houses. This category is also where participants post prompts that inspire writing.

Later in the OSI, participants also post a single in-progress piece of writing with an [author's agenda](#) to seek feedback from both the leadership team and other participants. In total, they will post three completed pieces, and ultimately, one polished piece of personal writing in the Teacher as Writer tab. Participants also provide feedback to each other after reading their peers' writing. There is an expectation that each participant make three comments on other pieces for every piece they have posted.

Teacher as Reflective Practitioner

In this tab, participants are asked to think about what they do and why they do it and where they need to grow/learn. They will post at least four pieces of writing, which might be an extended response to a teaching question, an exploration of an idea or question inspired by their classroom practice, a literacy narrative, their philosophy of education, or even a manifesto about how they teach writing. They might share all or some of their daily teaching journal, lesson plans annotated with reflections of what went right and what went wrong, or modifications they made to lessons they've taught. This year, we asked them to select a few bloggers from a [list of sites](#) we curated and ask them to identify some thoughts/ideas/questions they would like to think about further. We also asked them to start casting about for mentors to inspire them and looking for ideas that interest them and intersect with their practice. Participants also select from the four reflective starts and post a single piece of revised and polished pedagogical reflection.

In the traditional ISI, reflection about practice is integrated into daily activities. After each demo or activity, we have a discussion about the value of the work and how it can be adapted to different grade levels and content purposes. In addition, fellows post weekly written reflections to the ISI Edmodo space and then at the time of each of the four follow-ups. However, there is always a great exchange of teaching tools and tips as conversations begun during a morning demonstration continue over lunch, for example.

In the OSI, we encourage this exchange of ideas by modeling the practice of sharing lessons, blog posts, and other resources, but we also challenge participants to go out and seek resources that address classroom challenges and interests to share with the group. We offer a [list of online resources](#) to start their search, but encourage them to share their favorites as well as seek new information about ideas they are interested to learn more about. The OSI leaders model this practice, sharing blog posts with Deanna Mascle kicking things off with the blog post [Why Teachers' Writing Matters](#) and Lindsay Johnson sharing her reflections on [The Making of American: Democracy and Our](#)

[Schools](#). The links and ideas shared by the participants often fuel extended conversations as participants reflect on their experience with a particular resource or activity or find an idea they plan to steal for their own classroom.

For example, Valerie Dixon was researching flexible seating when she discovered a blog post about the use of [affirmations in the classroom](#) which in turn came back to our use of badges as affirmations. Kim Hawkins noted: *“What a wonderful idea for building an encouraging community!”* This then led Valerie to continue her research into gamification and badges which led her to the Good Behavior Game.

After sharing these informative, and often inspirational ideas, OSI participants are then challenged to move from these informative, yet informal, conversations to complete a more polished reflection. As part of the transparent nature of the OSI, everyone also has access to the final pedagogical reflections shared by the participants including Valerie Dixon’s “Gamified Classroom Management Plan,” Doreena Frasure’s “Philosophy of Education,” and Jessica Davis’ “Poem of Pedagogical Reflection.” Sharing such reflections inspires more conversations, such as this comment from Heather Music on Doreena Frasure’s Pedagogical Reflection: *“I really like that you talked about how important using technology in writing class is today. I agree with you. We are going to be a 1:1 classroom next year, and I am so excited, and nervous, about using the Chromebooks. I plan on using all the things you mentioned that we learned in this class.”*

We did run into a slight organizational problem with this section of the OSI. Our participants were expected to post weekly reflections as part of their Community achievement, but several people posted those reflections in the Reflective Practitioner category. With smaller groups this is not a problem, but this year’s group of 15 meant it was harder to find those reflections and keep track of them - and also, those reflections do clutter up the category a bit.

This is just an example of how the leadership team continues to tweak and refine our approach to online learning. As our online learning awareness evolves, we are

constantly reflecting on the delivery mechanism and the organizational structure in order to be logical, efficient, and user friendly.

Teacher as Instructional Leader

In this tab, OSI participants prepare and share a lesson, with a writing prompt embedded, based on best practice and relevant standards. In addition to their demo, participants share lesson plans, instructional units, or procedures and protocols. Participants can also share resources or narratives about other professional developments they have attended or led. The presentation of these demos are varied, using PowToon, FlipSnack, Prezi, Google Slides, TES/Blendspace, or even Google docs. The demo remains posted in this tab for the entire four weeks, where other participants can comment, ask questions, or post similar lessons or modifications.

In a typical summer institute, each ISI fellow presents a 45-minute lesson followed by a 30-minute discussion concerning modifications, adaptations, and grade level considerations. At the end of the conversation, the leadership team passes out index cards, and the fellows respond in writing to the fellow who has shared the demo.

While we initially worried that the kind of back-and-forth exchanges that occurred in a face-to-face format would be lost in an online platform, we've noticed that the same amount of questions and clarifications take place in the online institute with the additional benefit of having all those conversations archived in a virtual space.

In a typical ISI, fellows only present one demo, but in the OSI, if a participant has signed up for six hours of graduate credit, they are required to present two demos. In the 2017 OSI, we had fourteen participants who were taking the OSI for graduate credit, and one participant for professional development credit. Because there are no time constraints in an asynchronous platform, we actually had 33 demos posted, double the number of rich curriculum experiences that our traditional institute offers.

In addition, because we are having these conversations in a social media platform, the materials (plus the ensuing conversations) are archived. Instead of a 30-minute conversation that may only be recorded from a single source in the

ethnography, the OSI preserves threads in a perennial virtual space. For the 33 demos posted, each demo averaged five additional posts. About a third of the participants weighed in on the demo threads, which, we have found, is typical in an ISI after-demo conversation held face-to-face. The comments in the demo threads range from participants' modifications of the lesson for their classroom to participants linking other resources that could be used to enrich the demo. This provides a great archived resource for teachers when they get far into their school year and remember someone shared a lesson at the OSI that they could use. When they return to those threads, they have a wealth of resources that are saved.

In addition to the 33 demos that were posted, one participant posted a lesson she had never taught, but wanted feedback on before taking it into her classroom in the fall. Another participant wanted feedback on taking up leadership. Samantha wrote: *“As I mentioned in a different post, my school has little to no focus on writing. We are an extremely low performing title I school located on the west side of Charleston, WV. I have reached out to my last principal for some guidance but I know she is busy. I guess I'm just overwhelmed and want some advice on where to start. We do not have a county writing plan to my knowledge. Where can I start to make some effective change in our writing?!”*

Feedback on district program design or an untested lesson wouldn't be possible in the ISI in any formal sense because of the time constraints, but in an online platform, there's unlimited time to pursue feedback on just about anything.

Teacher as Researcher

In this tab, participants design and implement an inquiry project focused on a specific challenge in one's own classroom practice. Early in the OSI, participants post descriptions of three possibilities for projects or subjects they might be interested in pursuing along with an explanation for how this addresses a personal concern for their own practice as well as why this subject might be a question of interest to other teachers.

Ultimately, they choose one of these possible inquiries and do research during the four weeks of the OSI. The participants will post their research findings in this tab. The final deliverable might take the form of a journal article, a curated collection, or a review of the literature surrounding this topic.

The research topics were varied - ability grouping, writing conferences, cognitive research on the brain and writing, digital notebooks, cursive writing, flexible seating, bell ringers, argumentative writing, close reading, gamification, and badging.

During the ISI, fellows also adopt a research topic, but it is coupled with a year-long action research plan. Fellows meet on four Saturdays during their follow-up year to discuss their research findings, and ultimately, they present their research to the incoming fellows the following summer.

2017 OSI participant Valerie Dixon speaks to the power of researching and reflecting in her final reflection: *“I have reflected and researched on educational practices that I have used in the classroom & discovered ones that I intend to incorporate in the future - flexible seating, digital interactive notebooks, badges, google, my list goes on and on. Every single aspect of this project has been relevant and meaningful!!”*

Cabinet of Curiosities

This tab is like that drawer in your kitchen where you throw everything that doesn't belong anywhere else. This year, tips for growing your professional learning network along with a list of publishing opportunities for student writing were posted here, but a unicorn meme could totally be justified in this space.

As you can see, we use the Google+ platform as a party house with seven rooms. Even though you might move in and out of certain rooms that serve specific purposes (like Teacher as Leader or Teacher as Writer), everyone in the group is still at the same party, and conversations have a tendency to “wander” with the participants.

Sometimes a conversation that started in the Teacher as Leader tab/room bleeds over into another tab/room. Our site director, for example, shared a lesson about trauma writing in Teacher as Leader tab, and while there were conversations on that thread, another participant posted a great resource about the use of journaling to help students cope with PTSD in the Teacher as Researcher tab/room. The conversations continued to be rich, embedded with personal practice, and connected to external resources as the participants post links and documents to the threads.

Post-OSI

The post-OSI experience is much different from our post-ISI experience. Whereas the ISI participants attend four follow-up sessions spaced several months apart to reconnect and report about their ongoing inquiry project, the OSI participants have no such obligation. The research question they have investigated during the OSI begins and ends during the institute, unlike the ISI which asks participants to conduct action research with their students throughout the follow-up year. The OSI participants are in continuous connection with one another through the Google+ site. Because we build the OSI in a platform independent of our site's university Blackboard framework, the work of the OSI is archived and available in perpetuity. Also, the OSI leaders make sure to invite participants to participate in our site's continuity programs such as our [Fall](#) and Spring Writing Retreats and our annual conference, [Writing Eastern Kentucky](#). Many participants, who are within driving distance, attend and some have even applied for the ISI.

Technology Considerations

Creating an online or hybrid summer institute requires site leaders to make several important decisions about platform and access. There is not one perfect platform as each site and each leader has a unique context. It is not our intent to argue that our

choices are the right choices for your unique context. Rather, we will tell you about the choices we made.

The first few years of our OSI were much more similar to a traditional graduate class than our ISI. Those early OSIs were primarily located within Blackboard course shells (the course management system of our host institution) and were structured with assignments and due dates. We did use Twitter to offer a more informal backchannel to support the more informal interactions that build community at a traditional ISI. We also experimented with using Google docs to facilitate conversations about our writing to replicate writing groups. However, it quickly became apparent that managing multiple platforms was confusing and often counterproductive, so in 2013 we moved our OSI from Blackboard to Google.

We use three different Google products to support our work: a closed Google+ (G+) community as our meeting space, a Google Site to host our handbook, and Google Drive to hold our individual work. The G+ community interactions are organized using seven categories to manage the incredible volume and flow of posts, and these categories reflect the traditional work of the summer institute.

Our online summer institute has always been asynchronous to make the experience as flexible as possible for our participants as well as the leadership. We believe that asynchronous structure is a key part of making our OSI accessible. We have found that participation during the OSI does ebb and flow, but never dwindles entirely. Once we made the switch to G+ (which allows us to participate on our phones and other handheld devices) we found that interactions increased exponentially. Both leaders and participants note that notifications on their phones prompted them to return to conversations because they were eager to see what others had to say about the topic. As Kindergarten teacher Jamie Bond reflected: *“As I finish my last assignment, I have found that I am a little sad. I have enjoyed the ring on my phone telling me somebody has posted and being able to comment/share ideas with peers outside of my school. I am thankful for all of the ideas, support, and that this forum will stay open for future help! I can agree with others in saying this has not felt like a class but more of an*

experience. I haven't dreaded the assignments but looked forward to learning and sharing.”

The decision to make online work synchronous or asynchronous is one that each site will need to make based on their unique context and intended audience as well as the preferences of the leadership. Synchronous communication, even on a limited basis, creates logistical problems that may bar some teachers from participating for the same reasons they could not participate in a more traditional ISI. Asynchronous communication definitely has some of its own drawbacks, such as the threat of time creep as we check our phones during family time and other events. We felt at the outset, and continue to feel seven years in, that the asynchronous format allows for more advantages than disadvantages, and we have not found asynchronous format to be a barrier to building community.

When selecting the platform for online professional development work, each site will need to consider the types of interactions they want to support and encourage. We like that G+ allows a much more informal and conversational space, but it can also be messy and sometimes requires some effort to keep up with all the conversational threads going on (a definite logistical challenge for the leaders). Not everyone feels comfortable with that level of mess. Blackboard, for example, is much more organized.

The issue of open vs. closed is also an important consideration when choosing a platform. We could not include non-graduate students in our institution's classroom management system for example. We have also found that working with Google products offers a low technology bar as even teachers unfamiliar with G+ or Drive are familiar with social media and find it easy to work with Google Drive as both the document and slides are similar to products they already use. The comfort level of the leaders as well as the participants with various platform options should be an important consideration when planning where your online summer institute will be located.

Badges As An Integral Online Tool

In many education communities, badges increasingly have become a method to motivate students beyond simple assignment completion. Badges are part of the gamification movement in education which adopts and adapts gaming culture to the classroom. In typical classrooms, they are awarded by the teacher and other students. They are also used in organizations like the Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts and the US military to show achievement and as credentials.

We use badges for the following reasons:

- 1) To create an environment that does not feel like a class even if many participants are actually taking graduate classes ([Achievement Badges](#))
- 2) To celebrate individual contributions and successes of the participant in order to foster community ([Recognition Badges](#))

Achievement Badges

Linking each traditional ISI goal and deliverable to a specific badge allows participants to craft an individual learning experience that serves their needs. We strive to truly emulate the NWP model of teachers teaching teachers by crowdsourcing a variety of pedagogical resources rather than creating disposable assignments. While the Community Badge is unlocked by building personal connections, the path to earning the remaining four badges is unique to each participant's ability level, experience, and need. We challenge our participants to earn five badges reflecting the traditional NWP values in order to [unlock each achievement](#):

- [Community](#)
- [Teacher as Writer](#)
- [Teacher as Reflective Practitioner](#)
- [Teacher as Leader](#)

- [Teacher as Researcher](#)

Recognition Badges

Whenever participants want to recognize or praise one of their peers, they simply [select an appropriate badge and provide evidence to explain their choice](#). For example, if one student provides exceptional feedback on a piece of writing, her peer may want to award them a Spiderman badge for making great connections. Awarding badges is important to our community because in a traditional ISI we regularly have the opportunity to celebrate individual contributions and successes. These badges are our virtual high fives. 2017 participant Janie Evans writes: *“If I could improve upon anything in this class, it would be to spend more time awarding badges. I have read so many wonderful pieces. I want to give a badge to everyone for sticking with it and writing from the heart.”*

Some Final Thoughts From Our Director

“The fear is always that you can’t replicate the “it” - the magic, sacred, the secret sauce of the ISI - in an online platform, but we’ve been doing this for seven years and have found that that’s not the case. It’s always funny to me when I bring in teacher leaders to the OSI and they say, ‘holy crap, the magic is here too,’” says Dr. Mascle.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do you replicate the magic that occurs at the ISI in an OSI experience?

A: We have found that the lack of face to face communication doesn’t impede community, but engenders richer and different connections. Because of the community building and the modeling provided by the facilitators, the magic still happens. The power of a created community is evident in this section of 2017 participant Valerie Dixon’s final reflection, complete with emojis: *“This community has taken over my life*

😞 I truly abandoned my FB 😞 I hope that although the session is over that we can keep our community going strong. I feel like I have known you ladies (and our gentleman) much longer than 4 weeks. I value your opinions and will want to turn to you in the future for advice on my writing and on my teaching (if I ever find another job). Thank you all for the wonderful experience.” Creating community in an online setting follows the same pattern of creating community in a face-to-face arrangement. We provide multiple opportunities for participants to share their lives with each other. All participants create Six Word Stories and a digital “Me Museum” as a way to introduce themselves. This creates community because everyone sees the whole person behind the computer: What they look like, who their people are, where they live, what they teach, how many pets they have, and what they value. This creates an immediate bond. Additionally, participants are asked to complete at least three writing starts from *Writing Alone and with Others* by Pat Schneider the first week. Facilitators model this, and their openness and honesty often creates that “safe area” necessary to create the magic found in ISIs.

Q: What if one of the OSI participants has a child issue or an emergency and has to leave an online meeting? How does your site deal with that?

A: We have no synchronous online meetings. Our site uses an asynchronous platform, so participants can fit the class into their schedule. If they have time at 3 AM, they can post then.

Q: Is an asynchronous or synchronous platform better for an OSI?

A: We have chosen an asynchronous platform because it allows participants to work when they can dedicate time to the class. The decision to choose asynchronous or synchronous depends on the needs of your site and your goals.

Q: In the traditional ISI, a fellow's commitment to the NWP process is evidenced by their investment in time. How do you gauge commitment and investment in an online institute where you can't "see" their involvement?

A: Every year we have fellows who complete the traditional ISI and never repay our investment in their professional development. We also have fellows who show up, but never actually invest in the project after it's over. Just like the ISI, the OSI requires finished pieces and conversation, and their investment is evidenced, not by merely sitting in a chair and breathing air, but posting in our online forums and responding to other posts. You can clearly see who is involved and who isn't. Badges are also awarded when each deliverable is met. Additionally, other group members award badges to participants when they offer particularly thoughtful or insightful comments or ideas.

Q: Does the anonymity of being behind a keyboard impact the level of respect or mindfulness of comments to one another?

A: It has not been an issue for our site. Because so much community is built within the first week with multiple methods, a bond forms quickly. This connectivity often surprises many who are skeptical of the OSI. Good leadership is key to creating an online environment that fosters openness and thoughtfulness. Moderators and the site director model curious yet respectful behavior and those who register for the OSI emulate what they see and read.

Q: How do you deal with a participant who writes out of anger and doesn't censor themselves before hitting the send button?

A: Again, most people tend to be more thoughtful about their comments before posting. In fact, heated exchanges are often non-existent in the OSI because people have time and space to consider their words. While people come from different worlds, the initial community building helps participants see each other as their whole selves, sitting behind the keyboard as fully dimensional people.

Q: How do you handle comments or posts that are “lost in translation” because no facial expression or tone of voice accompanies the words? How does this impact communication?

A: People who post comments that might be misinterpreted often use emoticons to clarify intent, and those who seek clarification of intent will ask questions, and use similar protocols they learn from the moderators when it comes to responding to others’ writing and comments. Because all the participants are putting themselves out there, there is an empathy that develops for each other rather quickly. Again, this lack of facial expression works in the favor of the OSI as body language can be misinterpreted in a face-to-face meeting.

Q: Could a hybrid of the ISI and OSI be effective? How do you balance the needs of teachers who have a desire to connect face to face with those who have travel challenges?

A: Absolutely, this is possible. The Morehead Writing Project OSI is completely asynchronous because that is what works for us, and we also have the resources to host an ISI. However, your region might need something different. We like the flexibility asynchronicity offers the class members because they often choose the OSI due to geographical, time, and commuting issues, but the addition of some synchronous face-to-face meetings could be just what your site needs.

Q: How do you encourage fellows to post and comment?

A: Most people comment because they want others to comment on their work. Additionally, there is often more interaction among the participants due to the “ping in the pocket” reaction. When someone posts and the group is modified, participants often cannot resist the urge to see what was posted. Part of earning their community badge is the requirement that they “pay it forward” three times.

Q: Where are the lunch conversations in an OSI which are critical in building community?

A: The breakfast and lunch conversations happen mostly in the Community category tab of the Google + platform. If several people become focused on a conversation, that thread can go on long after others leave. In a face-to-face ISI, those conversations are cleaned up with the napkins and dirty plates. Sometimes conversations start early and continue right up until the end of the OSI. This is the digital version of lunch conversation.

Q: How do the facilitators teach craft in the OSI?

A: Facilitators teach craft by modeling it just as is done in the ISI. For example, if a participant has a question about tone, diction, or syntax, a moderator or leader can deliver a mini-lesson just as he would in a regular ISI as well as providing hyperlinks to supporting resources. If a participant has a question about the teaching craft, the moderators often model the skill and posture of, say, questioning to dig deeper. The feedback is thoughtful, specific, and identical to that modeled to members of the ISI. If anything, the feedback is often tailored more specifically to the writer as facilitators can intentionally comment more easily because the conversation is asynchronous.

Q: What do demo lessons look like in the OSI?

A: Demo lessons are similar in format to the ISI. The participants teach a lesson by writing up a “walk-through” of the lesson. If the teacher has already created documents or other media for the lesson, they share it with the others. Then participants discuss how the lesson could be used or adapted with their grade level and content area.

Q: How do you deal with participants who over commit their time and cannot meet the requirements of the OSI?

A: This problem is not unique to online classes. Participants are adults and professionals, and we treat them as such. They must accept the consequences of their choices.

Q: How do you deal with the fact that participants in the OSI may have varying skillsets with technology?

A: The OSI leadership team is very sensitive to the struggles of participants of all ability levels. The leadership team and their peers offer advice, post online tutorials, and troubleshoot. Our awareness of the varying abilities of our participants played a role in our choice of platform because Google+ looks just like Facebook which is used by 90 million people worldwide.

Q: What does an inquiry based project look like in the OSI without the support of a follow-up year?

A: The OSI inquiry project spans the course of the OSI unlike the ISI which is coupled with a year-long action research plan. The participants will post their research findings in Google+. Their inquiry project begins and ends during the four weeks. However, those findings are archived on that platform in perpetuity.