



The New York City Writing Project Newsletter

Volume 6 No. 2

Spring 1987

A Note from the Editors

Many of the articles in this issue of the newsletter reflect the writers' strong personal feelings about Writing Project pedagogy, its contexts, and its purposes.

Barbara Gurr's article describes how her AP English students at Grover Cleveland HS interviewed people in the Ridgewood community about their experiences with war and wrote moving accounts of the effects of war on the individual. Joseph Bellacero, in an excerpt from his teaching journal, speculates on the impact that students and teachers have on each other's lives. "Be Prepared," a humorous piece by Warren Wyss, deals with the serious issue of obstacles teachers must overcome in order to bring a variety of learning materials to their classrooms. John Vanderwende and Joe Marciona show, through excerpts from student publications, the work of students who have pride in their vocational training.

In addition to our regular features, *Steal These Ideas* and *Project Notes*, we introduce a book column, *Read This Book*. Our first book review is written by Lila Edelkind. For future issues we invite readers to submit reviews of books on teaching and learning which might be of interest to our membership.

Finally, as an outgrowth of the Project town meeting held in February, we present what we hope will be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue among Project members about our beliefs and assumptions. In separate articles, Chris Kissack and Paul Allison each address the desirability and possibility of defining Writing Project ideology.

We hope that some of the issues raised on by our contributors are important to you. Let us know what you think.

The Literature-Life Connection: Oral Histories

It was early June. My Advanced Placement English class had just finished a unit on All Quiet on the Western Front which included the Pirandello short story "War,"

and poems on the same subject by Hardy, Crane, Owens and Jarrell. In an attempt to make a modern-day application, I sprinkled references throughout the unit to Vietnam --the recent literature, the play Tracers. And yet, I had the gnawing sense that while these 18-year-olds seemed to understand what I was talking about, it was for the most part an academic exercise for them. Certainly, I could recall the turbulence on campus, the clashes in the streets, the six o'clock news bringing the war into our den, just as the weatherman brought the news of squalls off the coast of the Carolinas. As much as I tried to personalize the experience for my students, to convey the tenor of the era so that they could appreciate the experiences of the young men and women of my generation (a generation I thought was close to their own), it was still too remote. I believed that the connection between their lives and others needed to be made and the best way to achieve such an understanding was for these students to take an active approach--to conduct interviews with people they knew outside the school setting who had a "war story."

Arthur Egendorf's Healing From the War provided the motivation for this activity. An excerpt,

Retelling one's story is an ancient cure. It allows people to take a more livable stance toward what they've experienced... Retelling is likely to allow us to feel 'more human'....

provided us with a start. I asked students to think of ways they could elicit others' stories, to determine who among family or friends might have a story to tell. Finally, I asked them to consider what they needed to know and why they needed to know it.

To give students a format, I shared excerpts of Studs Terkel's The Good War. We focused on the oral histories of 3 people: a woman who as a teenager in 1942 realized that war could touch the "privileged," an Austrian Jewish refugee, and a young recruit who was "wavin' the flag." I asked students to consider why the recruit's re-

collection had significance, although he had not been in combat, to speculate about the kinds of questions the interviewer might have asked, and to explain why his story had "authenticity." The assignment that evening was to conduct an interview with someone who had a memory of a war--a former soldier, a civilian--anyone who could provide some new insight or perspective for the student.

The next day, students brought their first drafts to class. The class listened as I read from Terkel's book. This time, I chose a Japanese woman's girlhood memory of the war. Again we talked about the subject's "voice"; the use of detail, the narration, the natural flow of speech. Finally, I challenged students to explain how this story of a Japanese civilian contributed to the impression of war as much as that of a combat soldier. For the remainder of the period, students met in writing groups, shared their interviews and responded to each others' pieces.

On the third day, students brought in second drafts. I modeled an active listening exercise. Students returned to their groups and applied active listening to each other's writing. I reminded these writers to reflect on revisions that seemed necessary and urged them to contact their interview subjects for clarifications.

When all the writers were ready to present their interviews, we spent 3 days in a "read-around"--listening, responding and making connections between their pieces and the literature we studied in class. At various points in the read-around, I asked students to write process pieces about their experience interviewing their subjects, to reflect after other students read their pieces aloud, and to jot down questions which were raised by listening to these interviews. I wanted them to integrate all that they had read, heard and wrote and to see the commonality.

Susan learned what life was like for her father, who was an adolescent living in an area of Poland occupied by the Germans during WW II. The realization that her father had suffered such hardship in his youth helped her appreciate and accept his reaction to situations today. This had been a period of his life that he had never

discussed with her. She reflected on the fact that he had been struggling to survive when he was of high school age and that she now enjoyed a fairly secure life. She wondered if she would have had the fortitude to survive, had she "been in his shoes."

He recalled:

In January 1945, the Russians moved in closer to Poland (German territory). There was bombing and shooting nearby. My family and I had to flee to the eastern part of Germany. From that time on, our home was on the street. We lived in wagons drawn by horses. It was cold during the winter months. If we stopped to rest, it was in a barn along the way. Many people froze to death here or died of exhaustion.... My father and I were captured by the Russians in March 1945. Men, women and cattle were taken to work camps.... Fortunately my mother and sister were not taken captive. The work camps were unpleasant. There was not enough food, about 600 grams of bread and a little soup for the entire day. We worked hard and long, about ten hours each day. We slept in "bunkers" which were houses dug in the ground with a roof over them. We slept on hard wooden floors. Often we would try to save some bread. There were so many rats, as big as cats, and they would do anything to try to get the bread from you. It wasn't unusual to wake up at night and feel a rat standing on your head. (laughs as he recalls this incident)

Because we were constantly fed soup, my father's body filled with water. No medical help was available, and before he could return to the rest of our family, he died. Due to this poor nourishment, strong men became so weak that a tiny scratch could cause an infection serious enough to kill any man.

We were overjoyed at being reunited again after 3 1/2 long, hard years. However, my mother didn't believe at first that I was really her son, not even when I showed her my passport. (laughs at this memory) It took a while before she recognized characteristics

in me which convinced her that I was really her son.

The greatest effect war had on my life was that I never received proper education. During the war there were not enough teachers. One day schools were open, the next day they were closed. When I returned from the work camps, my brother and I had to support our younger sisters since my father had died. The younger ones received an education, but we didn't have that opportunity.

Another young woman interviewed a man who was 18 when he was drafted into the German army during WW II. The interview with Mr. W. helped give Remarque's novel verisimilitude for this student.

Upon questioning Mr. W. I learned that... he had a similar experience as Paul did in All Quiet on the Western Front in that one day he was in a dug-out with a wounded Frenchman who was shot in the eye and bleeding profusely. Out of sympathy Mr. W. wanted to spare his life, but within those 5 minutes of thought came a German Commander and shot the Frenchman in the other eye and he fell. "I never did forget that face, that trembling face that literally cried tears of blood." (At this point Mr. W. gave out a heavy sigh.) Ironically... 3 months later Mr. W. was caught with a knife wound in his own eye and... he wears a patch over his war wound.

His memories of the war are very tormentful. He constantly can smell the blood of the wounded soldiers, "it is everywhere" he comments. The blood is heavy and dry and the smell is sharp. This nostalgic feeling usually overcomes him in the quiet mornings.

Rita, a Polish-born student, got a bit of a history lesson from her mother who recalled moving to another town farther west when she was 5 years old...

We had to flee the Russians. You see, Poland had been very unfortunate. You must have learned in your social studies class about the secret treaty

signed between Germany and Russia before WW II in which the two nations agreed to divide Poland--West goes to Germany, while East is taken over by Russia. As a result, Polish people had to fight on two battlefronts. Getting back to your original question, I remember a German blitz on our town. At one moment we heard sirens. I was with a bag of groceries, standing on a street, too scared to move. People started pushing me around, shouting that the Germans are coming. A kind woman seized my hand, and we ran to a nearest shelter. In the shelter it was very hot. Children were crying, and men were running about looking for their families. Then we heard the German planes dropping bombs around us. I was scared and I started crying. The woman tried to comfort me, but I desperately wanted to be with my mother.

Another history lesson was learned by Cathy:

The years '36 to '38 were beautiful in France under socialist President L. Bloume. He was the one that gave vacations and the work week went from 6 to 5 days. I'll never forget those years or the summer of '39. I was 15 in '39, life was refreshing, money was good... all of France was prosperous. The beautiful days in St. Tropez in the French Riviera, the beautiful girls. We all enjoyed "The Good Life." In look back I see that there was some reason for suspicion; that it was almost too good to be true. It was like that tranquility and silence that you hear before a great storm. Worse yet-- a gorgeous woman swaying her way towards you. You're so absorbed in her beauty that you don't realize what else is going on around you, then you get your legs knocked out from under you.

Yeah, well anyway, September '39, we were caught with our pants down. German armies invaded Poland and we stuck by so two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. The French did not have an army and could not hold a line. We were not prepared. The Germans had been preparing for their revenge for years! When the Nazi

armies invaded France in 1940 their route was through neutral Holland and Belgium then Northern France. They bypassed the Franco-German border with its mountainous terrain and Maginot Line. The real shock was that as soon as the Germans landed we found we were swarming with spies. We thought the shoe store owner and our neighbors were French but when the Germans invaded they spoke perfect German. You'd run to your neighbor and they'd start speaking perfect German. It was a living nightmare.

During the first year we thought the war was not going to last long. I was 16 at the time and my schooling was over. Food became very scarce and by the end of 1940 there was no food on the table.

...the memory of searching for food keeps coming back and mother calls to me to come with her and find some food. We would go out together in the street looking for cat. I would set traps in the woods for birds and rabbits. We became savage hunters to survive.

Julie's father, a medic during the Korean conflict recalled:

"I felt sick and scared and was thankful that it wasn't me." As if he had known my next question, he added, "It doesn't become routine and you never get used to seeing death. Soldiers cried all of the time and never tried to hide their feelings and put up a brave front because everyone was afraid of dying."

"...As for affecting my life... I was training for the major leagues at the Giants training camps... The war put a damper on my dreams for that..." My father dug up his pictures of him training and in his baseball outfit. He seemed so proud...

Some students talked to their parents about Vietnam. Patricia's mother remembered a growing awareness of the war, the effect on her generation and the public's reaction:

My mother was in high school when the United States entered the Vietnam War. She said that during high school she didn't know much about the war.

"It was a strange name of a country that kept popping up in the paper."

When she was out of high school, many of her friends went to war. Her awareness of the war now grew. She started hearing about demonstrations against the war.

"Did you ever demonstrate?" I asked. "No," she answered, "Grandma wouldn't let me."

While I was talking to her, my mother became very angry. She remembered the anger she felt 20 years ago.

"I remember feeling angry when the old people made comments about the soldiers. They called them hippies and pot-heads."

She said that the problem was that if you were against the war, you were against the soldiers.

"No one wanted the war. No one knew why we were there. Everyone felt that the war was no good, but everything else went down with it."

She remembers arguing with her aunts and uncles who remembered WW II. The Vietnam war was nicknamed, "The Living Room War" because it was fought in so many American living rooms.

The Vietnam War raised everyone's consciousness and emotions for 12 years. I sent wedding invitations to Vietnam. I've lost friends to the war. Friends come back addicts or crazy. Or they're fine for 15 years and then they go crazy."

When our guys came back they were called 'baby killer' and were looked upon as massacring women and children. But the Vietnamese booby trapped their own kids. A 5 year old kid would offer the soldiers a piece of candy and then blow up in front of them. It was a dirty war! The training methods of our soldiers couldn't be utilized in that jungle. The Vietnamese had tunnels underground that they had been fighting in for 20 years. They knew the jungle like the back of their hand."

"They had what was called Shake-N-

Bake sergeants. These were 18 year old kids who were quickly trained and then put in command of troops.

There was no V-day because there was no victory. These were the first guys to lose a war. Americans didn't lose. These guys were looked upon as shit and it was unfair. These guys fought a war the same as anyone who fought in any other war. It's only now that we are realizing what these guys did. Finally, they got a parade. They deserve this honor. They fought their best in horrible situations and many of them are still fighting.

One father gave his daughter a capsule history of the time through music. He recalled the Jefferson Airplane; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; Bob Dylan and Joan Baez singing protest songs. He told her, "The Vietnam War led to the Kent State University incident... It was an infamous time for the nation."

Another student wrote about her wounded father being evacuated from a combat zone:

My father remembered his regiment trying to fight their way down a hill. After accomplishing this, they were being transported in trucks to return to camp. They were going to march there, but an Army official said that they deserved to be driven there after fighting in fierce combat. However, the trucks became easier targets and a mortar found the one my father and some other soldiers occupied. Eleven men, including my father, were thrown 30 feet from the truck upon impact. All he remembers is running, and not realizing the injury out of shock, for his back was broken and ripped open. There was a man running next to him without his legs. He was running on his knees! My father threw himself on the ground just as the truck blew up. He then passed out. Meanwhile, he was carried off on a stretcher and placed on the side of a small helicopter, which carried two wounded men at one time. You were strapped in and covered with flaps similar to those of a suitcase. There

was a slit for your eyes, otherwise total darkness.

My father regained consciousness while the helicopter was still in the air. He said that it was then that he experienced the worst fear of his life. For thirty long seconds, he thought that he had been buried alive. He screamed, "I'm not dead! Dig me out!" My father broke fingers trying to get out of the straps. Slowly, he began to realize where he was as the helicopter tilted and a ray of sun flashed through the slit.

When I asked what remains freshest in his mind pertaining to the war, he answered, "the cries of the wounded." The last words spoken by all wounded, before passing out or dying, were "Mom." He will never forget them and their suffering, and all the pain caused by the war.

I could not remember such a moving experience in teaching as I had had with this class working on this assignment. The read-around had a most profound effect. After each session, I was filled with a combination of awe, exhilaration and sorrow. I was so proud of their work: I felt I had led them to new realizations that would have a resonance for years to come. Yet, I was filled with sadness at what I had heard.

I know know that no amount of reading of the literature--poems, novels, short stories--could have the same impact on my students that the process of these interviews had. It seemed, in the end, that the reading served as the introduction to a more important exercise. What they had learned through talking, questioning, listening, writing, revising and sharing was what Remarque and others had tried to explain. Clearly, it was best understood when it was "discovered." My students now know more about their families, neighbors, and themselves, and uncovered some universal truths about war and its impact on human lives.

Barbara Gurr
Grover Cleveland HS

From a Teaching Journal

(Letter to Kimkeisha C.--let's say
15 years from now.)

Dear Kim,

I don't suppose you remember me much. I was your English teacher in the fall of 1986 when you were in the co-op program at Evander.

Don't worry about having forgotten me. I wouldn't expect you to remember. I only had your class every other week and during your week with me, you did tend to miss several lessons.

And even more than that, you rarely seemed to notice me much. Not that you were quiet or shy in the class. No, indeed, you always had a comment, an answer and a story to share with us and if I didn't call on you, you seldom let that stop you.

I suspect, though, that this wasn't unusual. You were probably more or less the same in all your classes. At least, you gave me no reason to suspect you were acting any different for my benefit.

Ah, but you're wondering, "What is the point of all this?" "Why is this 50-year-old geezer writing to me now?"

Well, you know, teachers are horribly poor at predicting the future for their students. I'm sure, for example, that I never suspected at the time that you would turn out the way you have. In fact, I believe I was predicting that, barring catastrophic illness or fatal accident, you would be spending uncountable years in the eleventh grade at Evander.

Still, there was one prediction that I made which has come true: that you would always try to find ways to hide the fact that you can neither read nor write; that you would show contempt for anything written with over a 6th grade vocabulary; that you would choose not to like literature, intelligent debate, analytic thought because, to your very deep and enduring shame, you simply cannot understand them.

And the reason I am writing to you is because I've seen so many like you, sleeping during the readings, talking during the reviews, scribbling a half-sentence in their journals, failing spelling tests with a 32%; and I want to know: What could I have done to get the monkey off your back?

Was there a way I could have made you see that the ability was in you and the rewards were great?

At 52, people tend to grow a bit more pessimistic--perhaps it is the growing understanding that within 30 years they will almost certainly be dead--and I'm beginning to worry about the effect I'm having on the world by letting folks like you, with your hidden shame, slip through my fingers unhelped.

So tell me if you can: How could I have reached you? How could I have "taught" you!

Sincerely yours,
Joseph Bellacero
Evander Childs HS

Read This Book

Thomas Newkirk and Nancie Atwell, Understanding Writing: Ways of Observing, Learning and Teaching K-8. The Northeast Regional Exchange, Inc., 1982.

Understanding Writing is a collection of articles written by teachers, for teachers, and that is where its strength lies. In much the same way that we, as teachers of writing or participants of writing process workshops, create a community of writers, this book provides us with access to a community of writing process teachers who see themselves as researchers and learners in their classrooms.

The contributing authors invite us into their classrooms, to look over their shoulders and observe their students. As we see the classroom through their eyes, we also have the opportunity to step back and observe them as teachers assisting young authors as they find their way along the continuum from topic selection to publishing pieces.

The articles are organized into five sections. In the first, "Beginnings," we are introduced to our youngest classroom authors, those in kindergarten, first and second grades. Throughout this section, we are constantly reminded that the acquisition of writing skills is highly developmental. We see children engaged in the act of composing, tackling the problems of composing by employing strategies that enable them to express meaning. In the classrooms

of Kathy Mathews and Judith Hilliker, this strategy might be drawing, which they observe is a way of rehearsing, organizing and "writing" a story. They caution us to value those drawings, using them to encourage oral expression, development of detail and revision, both orally and pictorially. They, along with Ellen Blackburn, urge us to see how the drawings support the young authors and become less important as they gain control over print and realize how it can be employed to convey their ideas. Susan Sowers' article on invented spelling follows the development of drawing into print. It not only informs us about how to look at a piece of early writing and to identify the stage of development it represents, but how to use this information to enable these children to move to the next stage of development. Victor D'Ambrosia describes how personal contact in conferencing before, during and after his second-graders write has helped them move through the "random drifting," "refining" and "interactor" stages of development. And first-grade teacher Sandra Bonin shows us how she supports her students by exposing them to a rich variety of non-narrative writing encouraging them to experiment with those forms.

The second section, "Conferences," is devoted to what many of us in the writing process movement feel is the heart of the process and the key to its success. The editors urge us to look at the collaborative nature of the conference, and how this structured collaboration is a model for the kinds of thinking we hope our students will internalize so that they can "conference themselves" as they are composing. The articles point out different varieties and purposes for conferences, but the underlying focus is on developing thinking.

Joan Simmons begins this section by recommending pre-writing conferences to help students find and develop topics. She illustrates how peer interviews and interest inventories assist her eighth graders in realizing the incredible number of options they have as they decide what to write. At the early childhood level, Sharron Cadieux lets "Children Lead the Way," encouraging her students to "conference" their blockbuilding constructions, pegboard designs, draw-

ings and printed messages, challenging them to grow in critical thinking and creativity. The observations she makes as the children share the whys and hows of the creation of their product inform her as to the kind of instruction each is ready to receive and best utilize.

"Writing and Reading," the next section, highlights the links between these two subjects, a link which has recently been the focus of a tremendous amount of attention. The four authors included in this part record their observations of changes in the quality of reading achieved by students who wrote regularly following the model of drafting, conferencing and publishing. All agree that the level of thinking required and modeled in actively creating written text (and drawing) affects the way students read and perceive the texts both they and others create. Mary Ellen Giacobbe's 6-year-old student, Tommy, became a more critical reader of his own texts by making evaluative judgments of his stories. As his writing developed, so too did his criteria by which to measure his writing. Jack Callahan's fourth graders used what they learned about the craft of writing to improve their comprehension of the stories in their basal reader. By having his students take first draft responses to the reading into the cycle of conferencing--questioning, discussing and revising--Callahan witnessed a marked growth in their ability to analyze story structure and in their understanding of the author's point of view as it related to the construction of the story. This kind of sophisticated reading appears to be credited to the first hand experience the students had in authoring. As Thomas Newkirk states, by having an "insider's view of written language" the writer is less likely to be intimidated when faced with the task of comprehending the written language of others. This is certainly borne out by the students in Paula Fleming's Reading Improvement Program who made impressive gains in standardized reading scores which she attributes to the inclusion of a writing component in her class.

The focus of the book then turns to "Assessment," the sticky issue of evalu-

ating student writing, a task which raises complex questions as to what should be assessed (content, effort, mechanics) and how to objectively assign a grade. Finding a system of evaluating progress and product which also values individual growth and development, is a difficult challenge indeed! The three authors in this section advocate maintaining a cumulative writing folder for each student. They stress the importance of having student writing arranged chronologically so that it can be reviewed to give a more holistic picture of change and growth over time. Each author shares her own system for methodically looking at the drafts and finished pieces of writing in the folders. Anne Bingham describes the specifics she looks for in the samples she selects from a folder. The inclusion of samples of her analyses, complete with student texts and her annotated comments, provide us with a mini-course on evaluating early childhood writing achievement, using the folders as an aid in parent education, articulation of a child's progress from year to year, and as a tool for students to use in reflecting on how they've changed as writers.

Nancie Atwell and Hasse Halley continue the discussion, specifically describing how they each use the folders to help determine letter grades for their students. Atwell does not mark individual pieces of writing, but schedules a ten-minute evaluation conference with each student, in which she engages the student in talking about, analyzing and appraising the progress made during the marking period. Her article includes a list of some of the interview questions she uses as well as a sampling of some of the specific suggestions she might ask the student to pay attention to in future writing. Halley's approach, used with high school students, presents another alternative. Every fifth week, she asks her students to select a piece of writing from their folder and to bring it to the polished, final draft stage. The writing is submitted with all previous drafts and any documentation of group and peer conferencing that may have taken place in the generation of the piece. Halley then uses a checklist of minimum requirements, reviews the drafts and evaluates the content and mechanics so

as to arrive at a letter grade for the work. She also discusses the use of written comments to communicate her thinking about the writing to the student.

The last section of the book, "Reflections," includes three personal reactions to being cast in the roles of both learner and teacher. Marna Bunce and Elizabeth Parillo discuss issues they confronted as writers. In "Time and the Taking of it," Deborah Sumner speaks of the need to be patient and to have faith in order to cope with the tensions created in a writing process classroom in which students and teachers come together to set and solve problems in an exciting collaborative venture.

Several years ago, after attending my first writing process institute, I read this book with the enthusiasm of one who wanted to know all there was to know about being a process model teacher. I devoured the articles, looking for the "how-to's" and "what-to-expects." The book provided a ready-made support group of experienced classroom teachers who advised me to be patient, flexible and open to change based on my observations within my own room.

Re-reading the book now, from the jaded perspective of a veteran of several years of writing workshops (both taken and given), of my own experiments in observing, learning and teaching, I felt a sense of reaffirmation. I rejoiced with these old friends in celebrating the writing of our students. At the same time, I was also challenged to make sure that I'm not just operating on automatic pilot. It served to remind me of the key elements of the process model that I often take for granted. I went back to my teaching and consulting with a renewed spirit, wanting to get caught up again in the adventurousness of self-discovery in the writing of my students and the learning that I experience as I observe and teach.

In all, this collection draws us to reflect on our own teaching and in doing so invites us into the network of thoughtful writing process teachers who continually observe, learn and grow.

Lila Edelkind
PS 152K

Writing in Vocational Classes

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Plumbing, as a course offering at Alfred E. Smith HS, has always had a lower enrollment than many of our other vocational programs. I attribute this fact to the lack of knowledge of the plumber's duties on the part of our potential plumbing students.

Before I became an apprentice in 1946, there were always jokes about plumbers. Throughout my teaching career, I have striven to instill pride in the students that have chosen plumbing as a vocation, and to interlace the importance of plumbing with teaching the skills needed in the trade.

A motto, "The Plumber Protects the Health of the Nation," is posted conspicuously in the shop. I feel this enhances the image of the plumber for the students.

Mastering trade skills requires more than "gifted hands," which, by the way, I have never seen. The mind sends messages to the hands. A good tradesman has to have pride, the ability to work with others, and the ability to work unsupervised. To enhance one's skills, a knowledge of basic math, reading and writing is important. As in all trades, plumbers must be able to express themselves in writing for billing, contracts and ordering supplies.

As a member of the Writing Teachers Consortium at Smith, I thought it would be appropriate to give my students an opportunity to write about what they're doing in shop, and to express themselves in ways they believe are supportive of the class motto.

When I suggested we compile a mini-publication based on the importance of plumbing to the community, the students were most receptive. I was pleasantly surprised at the number of students volunteering to be writers, in addition to those who wanted to be artists and cartoonists. I am proud to be part of the team that created the small publication. In addition, I would like to thank Ms. Gail Kleiner for her assistance.

Here are excerpts from our booklet on plumbing, called "Tricks of the Trade."

John Vanderwende
Alfred E. Smith HS

* * * * *

My mother dropped her wedding ring down the sink a couple of days ago. She was crying, so I asked her what was wrong. She told me she dropped her ring in the sink. I asked her if it was in the sink basin in the lavatory. She said, "Yes." I said, "Don't fear Mom, just leave it up to me." My mother looked at me like I was crazy.

I went to my room and got a wrench and a bucket. I put the bucket directly under the trap. Then I loosened the C.O. (Clean Out) and out came the ring and a bunch of water. My mother hugged me and kissed me. Then she decided to give me a reward of \$10. I was very happy. Then my mother finally said, "I'm glad you're taking up plumbing at Alfred E. Smith!!" (by Albert M.)

"Plumbing"

Some people think
Plumbing is greasy,
But a plumber's job
is not that easy

We fix up toilets
To keep out sewer gas
These are some things
Which we learned in class

We fix up radiators
So that you can have steam
We fix up bathtubs
So that you can stay clean

The plumber has been
Throughout the generations
The plumber protects
The health of the nation.

(by Anthony R.)

SHIFTING GEARS

While listening to discussions of what other participants of the Writing Project were doing in their classrooms, it occurred

to me that I could use point-of-view writing to help the students in my class develop trouble-shooting abilities, such as the ability to analyze why a car is not operating properly.

My feeling is that if a student could visualize himself as a part of a vehicle, realize his function, and predict what will happen if he does not perform, he could gain good insight as to what must be done to return the vehicle to proper operation.

Using pre-writing, I asked the students to identify the major systems of the automobile which had been taught during the term. As the students named the systems, I placed them on the chalk board at random. Then I asked them to name a part and to instruct me to place it under the proper system. When that was completed, I asked for volunteers to describe, in their own words, the function of each system.

After placing that information on the chalk board, I asked the students to write from the point of view of one of the major systems, describing their function.

The following are some excerpts from student work on this project.

Joe Marciosa
Alfred E. Smith HS

* * * * *

If I were gears in the transmission, I'll have groups of large and small gears. In first speed, I'll have a small gear turning a large gear, to help me carry a load or if I was going up a steep hill. In second gear I'll have two gears of almost the same size working together. In third gear I will connect directly to the engine for speed.

I could also put myself in neutral and park.

My parts will get very hot because I'll be doing a lot of running and turning.

Without me the car would only have speed and a very limited ability, and convenience.

After a full day of work I feel dizzy because I would have been doing a lot of spinning.

(by Everett D.)

I am the seat of your car. I am made-up of soft leather. If a fat person sits on my body, I will suffocate. If a girl sits on my body I will be very happy. (by Edwin R.)

Once upon a time there was a shock absorber on a car that was stripped to almost nothing. I was the most scared part at the junk yard....I was almost brand-new, and strong. One night while I was sleeping, I awoke to find somebody was loosening my nuts and proceeded to slip me out of the car. I was screaming for my life. I didn't know where they were taking me.

The next day I found myself in a go-cart with a brake, hub, master cylinder, differential and a leaf spring. I knew them, they were from the old car I was from.

Mark rode us all through the park, over hills. I thought he would never stop. At 8:00 PM he put us in the garage. At 9:00 we broke out. We ran through shrubs trying to get away. Around the corner I saw the most prettiest shock absorber. It was love at first sight. I asked her to come along but she couldn't because she was in love with a torsion bar.

My heart was broken. I wanted to commit suicide. I jumped into the sewer and rusted to death.

(by David J.)

Steal These Ideas

Lila Edelkind of P.S. 152K in Brooklyn uses journals in class with her first graders. When students give her their journals to read, Lila comments and asks questions. Journals serve several purposes in her class. Lila uses journals as a way to give feedback and to get her students to extend their writing. Her responses often create a "back and forth" exchange about a particular subject. Journal writing accomplishes what a conference would, but in written form. Students also see this writing as a "challenge" and try to fill up an entire page.

Lila finds that through journal writing

her students let her know how they are feeling. One little girl wrote that she was upset because she liked the compliment that Lila put in another student's journal better than the comment in her own. This gave Lila the opportunity to explain how she commented, that she didn't write the same comments in everyone's book. There were several interchanges on this topic which resulted in the girl racing back and forth with her journal, giggling. Her mood had indeed changed. Other children have written things like, "I'm not happy this morning and I don't want to talk about it."

Lila also uses journals to model correct grammar, syntax and spelling. She finds that journals seem to make a difference for a number of children and increases their enthusiasm for writing. Students are very often seen thumbing through their journals, looking for her responses.

* * * * *

Ellen Shatz, a teacher at P.S. 105X in the Bronx uses reading groups with her fourth grade students. Students choose their own books and their own groups or pairs to work in; they read on their own and write entries in their literature logs. Before students go into groups, Ellen holds a whole class meeting where she and the class sit in a circle. She reads to them from various books, wanting to expose them to different types of literature.

Ellen gives very little structure to the small groups. Sometimes students bring their lit log entries to their groups and take turns reading them. Then they discuss the book. Other times they take turns reading to each other from their book or they act out scenes as if their book were a play. After working in groups, Ellen brings the whole class together again. Each group tells what they did, prompted by the question, "What did you learn today?"

When a group finishes a book, they work

on an activity to present to the class--a diorama, a poster or a short play.

Students who are not keeping up with the work (reading or making lit log entries) are taken care of by group members. A child who is not working is not permitted by the other children to participate in the group and must work alone. Usually, these children ask to be allowed back into their groups again.

Through all these activities, Ellen said, her students realize the importance of sharing and working with others.

* * * * *

Confronting the difficult task of starting students off in writing groups, Ronald Bleier of James Monroe HS stole this idea from Paul Allison. At their first group meetings, Ron asked his students to find 3 things which the group had in common. After teacher approval, each group shared their findings with the class. They wrote a process piece focusing on how they arrived at their conclusions, shared the process writing in groups, and engaged in active listening and discussion.

* * * * *

Gary Eiferman of Morris HS is using journals in his music appreciation classes. For homework, the students were assigned to listen to radio stations they would not normally tune in, such as those playing classical, jazz, or ethnic music. After recording the station call letters, the date, and the time, students responded to the music. Typical responses dealt with the feeling the music gave them, or what they liked or disliked about the selection being played. Gary commented, "Many students reacted positively to genres they had often avoided, and found alternatives to their usual diet of urban contemporary music."

* * * * *

To encourage revision as well as to keep revision strategies alive in the minds of her students, and to provide her with a quick overview of each piece being submitted, Elaine Spielberg of the HS of Art & Design has begun to do the following. The day final drafts are due (with--of course--earlier drafts and response sheets stapled

Newsletter Staff

Robin Cohen, Martin Luther King, Jr. HS
Melanie Hammer, HS of Art & Design
Lisa Rosenberg, James Monroe HS
Marcie Wolfe, Inst. for Literacy Studies

under them), she gives students 15 minutes to fill out a chart:

Revisions I Have Made

	Substi- tutions	Addi- tions	Dele- tions	Rearrange- ments
Earlier Drafts:				
Final Draft:				
In this piece, most of my revisions have been...				

Try it!

Be Prepared

"Thursday night stretch here again," I told myself gratefully. "That means pushing for the next week. Hmmmmm, next week's a holiday. The kids won't be able to sit still for a moment on Wednesday. I mean, of course, those who don't cut class. Why don't I do something that will entertain them?" I envisioned myself as a Ringling Brothers clown or perhaps a three-card monte dealer. Coming down to earth, I decided to see what audio-visual resources would be available at school.

By Friday morning I was rummaging through the Communication Arts storage room, about the size of a large walk-in closet. Nothing much to be really proud of, I'm afraid. The color TV set was "borrowed" this past summer; but we had the black-and-white. Maybe that would be a novelty to the students. We still had the VCR, thank God. I remember recently plugging the portable recorder player into the wall. You could hear the siege of Macbeth's castle only if you held your ear up to the speaker. What records did I notice? A German Singspiel by Madam Ernestine Schuman-Leink; you know, the one who sat on Brahms's lap as he sang his lullaby. The Helen Twelvetrees version of "Casey at the Bat." Also some rare old films in 16-millimeter--"Good Manners at the Office," "Ann Hathaway's Cottage," and "Peter Pear's Prosaic Puns." All these items I discovered on the shelves with great

difficulty. (First I had to find a dust cloth and wipe off an inch of grime from the surface of these treasures.)

I removed practically every album from the shelves, opened up every film can, and traced every VCR tape. Still, there was nothing so far that really excited me.

Suddenly I had an idea. We had been studying mythology in the ninth grade English classes, so perhaps I might find something both dramatic and informative on that topic. My searching eyes found a filing cabinet just made for filmstrips. "Moribund Words," "Albanian Nature Poetry," "Infected Inflections," "Rebel Without Clauses," "Shakespeare's Limericks," ...ah, "Mythology." My eyes finally found what I was looking for. Opening up the little red can with my teeth, I pulled a tightly-wound film out of its shell and looked at the contents in the light. The color of the film had faded to shades of red, but it still could be examined without difficulty.

"Human Sacrifices," I read. Well, that ought to keep the students awake. I read on. "Professor Lambert's Lecture at the University of Mexico." And so it went, crudely revealing through drawings a ritual that both ancient and more modern cultures enjoyed as one of their favorite pastimes: sacrificing human beings at the altar.

There were drawings of children being thrown into the fires to celebrate the Mesopotamian sun god, Jesus Christ looking perplexed on the cross, the Aztecs plucking out the heart of a martyr, and even the Nazis goose-stepping down the boulevard. Surely the students could relate to this.

My next project was to look for a decent filmstrip projector. Ah, found two so soon. Plugged them in. Ah, they didn't work. Down to Mr. Benry's room I marched. He's Mr. Fix-It. I stuck my head in his room. One of his students was about to light a match to his shoe, while another was sprinkling itching powder down the back of his shirt. "Sorry, Tarik, for bothering you, but when you have time, would you please show me how to work the filmstrip projector?" He said something about being tied up right now, which indeed he was. I uncut the ropes around his wrist. He did manage to say he'd take time during his

lunch period on Monday to work it out; then he fainted.

By Monday we had the projector going. Now came the next problem. My room had no shades. No screen either. Would the students be able to see the human sacrifices on the blackboard with bright sunbeams darting across their eyes? Again Mr. Benry came to my rescue. Up on the eighth floor there was one room, the old biology lecture room. Well, curtains were on the windows, so there would be just the right amount of light. I could also reverse the anatomy chart on the wall and use it for a screen.

That left an extension cord to be found. Mr. Benry would take care of that, too. He really is so considerate to us all. Oh, I could kiss his penny loafers. We may not have an audio-visual team, but we have a crackerjack team leader.

I would worry about the state of the audio-visual team another time. For now, I had to run to the library to get some background on the images in the filmstrips. The students might ask what the Druids did for fun or what the bird headdress on Professor Lambert's head was all about. Once I arrived at the card catalog in the school library, I was happy to find little difficulty. An entire drawer on sacrifices was found with the following subcategories: "mother's," "God's," "teacher's" and so on. There were also many articles to be found in family magazines.

Armed with information from the library, I felt comfortable enough to tackle commentaries as they might come up during the viewing. I could ask, "What do you see the elephant doing to the child?" or "What did the Aztecs do to the heart after it was plucked from the victim's chest?" Now I knew some of the answers to these questions.

Wednesday at last was here. All the little mechanisms were well-coordinated; nothing could go wrong. I had every confidence, moreover, that the students would learn to appreciate the importance of human sacrifices.

Warren Wyss
W. Irving HS

Project Notes

On February 21, 1987, part of the NYCWP meeting was devoted to a "town meeting" in which members were invited to raise issues of importance concerning future directions of the Project. With Ed Osterman serving as facilitator, participants wrote about and then discussed several issues which were later explored more fully in small groups. A spokesperson from each committee summarized the group's explorations and plans for action. Notes on these summaries follow.

Elementary School Outreach. This group discussed the need to re-establish contact with other elementary teachers who have been involved in the Project. They plan to meet again to discuss teaching concerns and establish networks of support. Study groups are being considered.

Professional Reading. This group shared ideas and suggestions for fulfilling their needs for professional connection and development. They speculated about:

- Contacting other writing projects;
- Focusing on theory in their readings and discussions, which would then lead to practical applications;
- Getting article recommendations; and
- Reaching out beyond the people present at the meeting to the general membership.

As of this writing, one study group has been formed. NYCWP members interested in meeting in study groups to discuss articles dealing with professional concerns should contact the Project office.

Saturday Meetings. This group brainstormed ideas for revitalizing the Saturday meetings. Discussion focused on two major areas:

--Attendance: How can we re-establish connections with previous members, how can we encourage current members to attend, and how can we encourage course participants to become members? Ideas included personal phone calls, questionnaires, invitations to teachers in in-service courses during the duration of the course, and ways making newcomers welcome.

--Content: How can we get people more involved in the meetings? Ideas included small groups activities such as teacher talk groups, interest groups, article discussions, and a revival of successful presentations.

Beliefs and Assumptions. This group raised some political, philosophical and pedagogical concerns of NYCWP members. Questions raised about the Project included:

--What beliefs do we have about teaching? learning? the school? the role of the Writing Project in effecting change?

--What assumptions do we hold about the above?

--What do we believe works?

--What supports do we need to be able to teach according to our beliefs?

--How are our goals similar to or different from the Board of Education's?

--How can we connect with teachers in other school systems who share similar philosophies?

--What are the underlying political assumptions with which we function, as individuals and as a group?

--Do we need a policy statement or "white paper" of Project ideology?

Some of these issues are explored in detail in the following articles.

Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe HS

What Do We Believe?

I have been an active member of the NYC Writing Project since 1980 and have become increasingly concerned about the direction that the Project is taking. We have, in the past, looked at our classroom practice, at our in-service activities, and at how we function in our schools, and have made changes based on what we saw were our strengths and weaknesses. In the spirit of this history of growth and change, I think it's time now for a hard look at the Writing Project, at both our theory and practice. Without this self-examination we may find ourselves on a path that leads, at best, to educational irrelevance or, at worst, to open support of a deteriorating school system.

Though we make no official statements of what we believe about education or of our relationship to the NYC Board of Education (for which most of us work), our classroom practice, in-service courses, presentations and Project meetings reveal values and assumptions about who we are and what

our role is in the schools. We also define ourselves by the issues which we do not address. I do not believe that most teachers have made conscious choices or decisions about what it means to be a Writing Project member. In fact, most of us have probably not given it much thought. I think we must examine our ideas and practice, and begin to consciously define who and what we are. Here are some issues which I think the NYCWP must address:

1. We must re-examine our classroom practice. We have, in most cases, been successful at getting students to write. But the techniques we use (memory chain, mapping, time lines, personal journals, etc.) center the writing almost exclusively in students' individual and personal experience. It may very well be that personal experience is where student writing should start but I think we must urge students to gain insight from their own experiences and then begin to see connections to others in the class, the school, the world. As educators our goal should be to help students become critical, thinking people who can evaluate their situations, plan a course of action, and make real changes in their lives. Though writing can certainly be emotionally satisfying in and of itself, I see its primary value as a tool for thinking and doing. We need to develop classroom activities which provide students with the motivation and opportunity to go beyond the personal narrative to writing which evaluates and critiques the world they live in.

2. We must re-examine our in-service courses for teachers. Many of the techniques we use to encourage teacher writing (guidelines, looping, memory chain, etc.) lead to the same kind of personal writing that our students are doing. The writing groups we set up in Project courses provide support for teachers in the process of writing but seldom lead to discussions of the implications of the content of that writing or challenge ideas found in the writing. Active listening is often used to provide non-judgmental acceptance of whatever the writer has to say. I have been at read-arounds where teachers have shared writing that contained racist, sexist or anti-student ideas. These pieces had been through

writing groups and yet their content had never been challenged. This, then, becomes the model that teachers take back to their classes. How can we urge teachers to challenge student ideas and encourage them to think critically when we don't do the same for the teachers in our courses?

3. We must begin to define and demand the minimal conditions under which education can take place. Overcrowded schools and classrooms, insufficient materials, outdated texts, deteriorating buildings, isolation from our peers, administrative harassment, etc., all have critical impact on our ability to teach. These issues have been brought up by teachers in our in-service courses as well as by our own Project members. By not addressing these conditions, we give our silent consent to them. We also give tacit support to a Board of Education that is responsible for many of these problems. We might start by simply defining for ourselves what we need in order to be able to do our job. Drafting a position paper, circulating a petition, enlisting the support of students and their parents, sponsoring a demonstration--these are all activities which we might consider if we are serious about improving education.

4. We must, as an organization, define our relationship to the Board of Education and to the administration in our own schools. I do not believe that the NYC Writing Project and the NYC Board of Education share common goals for the city's students. I want my students to understand that they can use writing for change--as a tool to identify those things they find oppressive. This might mean that students write and circulate a petition against arbitrary restrictions on the use of bathroom passes, or draft a letter to the principal protesting his illegal hall-sweep policies, or write an article challenging the right of the military to recruit in public schools when no alternative job recruitment is provided, or compose a statement condemning the racist murder of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach. I know that the Board does not want these things--does not want schools filled with active, thinking, independent teachers and students.

The question becomes, then, why is the Writing Project hired and funded by the

Board of Education? What are they paying for? I think we are hired to make them look good--to provide another program that principals can add to their school improvement plan and that superintendents can include in their monthly reports. My concern is that we will become so financially dependent on the board that we dare not challenge them--or worse, that their support and funding, so necessary to perpetuating ourselves, will eventually change what we believe must be done in the schools.

5. We must become an anti-racist, activist organization. Our schools, mirroring our cities, have become hotbeds of racial unrest. Most schools in NYC are segregated. I have heard (and have been told that) many administrators and teachers express racist ideas openly at meetings, in cafeterias and teachers' lounges. These remarks are often directed against both minority students and teachers.

Since the majority of NYC's school population has become Black and Hispanic, cutbacks in funding by both city and federal government have resulted in a worsening of conditions for all students. The overall dropout rate for NYC high school students is close to 40% by the Board's own figures (over 50% by independent studies) while ASPIRA quotes a figure of 70% for Hispanic youth.

We must become actively anti-racist both within and outside our classrooms. This would mean encouraging discussions and writing about racism in our society. We would urge our students to write letters of condolence to the family of Michael Griffith and letters to City Hall protesting the killing of Eleanor Bumpurs. We might have students examine segregation in our own schools or do reports on racist housing practices in our neighborhoods. We would inform our students of anti-fascist forums and demonstrations and encourage them to attend.

The Project itself could consider taking positions on important political issues. Other professional organizations have issued statements against apartheid, for example. The MLA (Modern Language Association) came out with a position against aid to the contras. The NCTE (National Council

of Teachers of English) has for years demonstrated its anti-racist and anti-sexist beliefs in its language policies and conference programs. Once again, we must model to teachers and students active involvement in the world around us. We can use our influence among teachers, make ties with parents and encourage students to join in efforts to achieve a decent education and life for us all.

Christine Kissack
Writing Teachers
Consortium

Evangelical Unbelief

The notion that the members of the NYC Writing Project should write a document that sets forth our beliefs shows a misunderstanding of who we are. The Project has been and should always remain just what our name implies: a project, a process not a product.

We should avoid becoming an institution that represents an ideology or even a group of ideologies, and instead we should make clear that our beliefs are open and constantly evolving. We are always changing because our understanding of who we are, who our students are, how the school system works, what writers and readers do, how people learn, and how teachers teach is always changing--hopefully for the better.

We are a community of teachers committed to experimentation, not to a statement of belief. If the Project represents a revolution in teaching, as I believe it does, it's a revolution that asks its adherents to revolt again and again, to never be satisfied with or limited to any ideology. It is a movement that encourages teachers to learn, not to convert.

For us to write, or to even seek to write, a statement of beliefs distracts us from the never-ending process of changing ourselves and our schools.

But if we were to spend our time and energy in writing one, what would the Writing Project's Statement of Belief be? Either it would be so broad that almost any teacher of goodwill could give assent, or it would be a creed to which few could totally subscribe.

It might be possible to produce a state-

ment which would summarize what we believe about learning. (Notice that I'm not saying we could produce a statement about teaching. It seems to me that comparatively little is known about how teachers in actual classroom situations can apply our knowledge about how people read and write. We are not ready yet to make a statement about teaching.)

No doubt most of us believe that learning takes place best when students are empowered. That is, we presume that students are capable--that they are much more than empty vessels that need to be filled--and that our job as teachers is to nurture our students' capabilities by encouraging them to take effective actions. Few would disagree with the claims that people learn to read by reading and that they learn to write by writing. Also, I suppose that we all see reading, writing, and/or thinking as recursive processes. Finally, we could agree that these text-creating activities should take place within the context of real communication, not classroom simulation.

We could add to this list, but what purpose would it serve to enshrine these broad, by now mostly self-evident beliefs except to bore many of us to death?

Alternatively, members of the Project could set out to define its beliefs in detail. We could write the Ten Commandments for Teaching Writing, which might include guidelines, loops, freewriting, active listening, etc. Obviously this would take some fleshing out, but it could be done. And in the end it could even be summarized into a Writing Project Pledge of Allegiance that would ask converts to forswear the teaching of topic sentences, the five paragraph essay, and prescriptive grammar.

And of course we would make clear that we are of the Peter Elbow school of process teachers, and not of the Linda Flower or the New Rhetorical schools. We believe that it is important for the writer to keep his or her concern for audience at the end of the process, not at the beginning. And paragraphing, notwithstanding the recent reader-response research, should be left for later steps in the process too.

Maybe, I don't mean to be facetious. At its best, my classroom is animated with

guidelines, loops, freewriting, and active listening. I usually find myself in agreement with the Elbows and the Murrays who emphasize personal voice, freedom and power, and often I think that the Flowers and the D'Angelos are offering little more than regressive formulas.

But my purpose here is not to argue for or against any plank of any proposed platform. I want to say that we don't need a Constitution of the Writing Project, and further that I see any attempt to write such a document as a dangerous step toward rigid institutionalization.

The radical notion of the Project is that teachers will change their classrooms if they are given opportunities to write and to reflect on the teaching of writing. Because classroom changes follow personal growth, not conversion, the teacher is trusted to deduce a personal theoretical framework from an experience with writing.

The Project should nurture growth by showing that it trusts teachers to find their own paths within our discipline. We should continually be developing novel experiences that lead teachers and administrators to question their pedagogical assumptions, but we should never tell people what those assumptions should be.

Let's keep the Project out of the business of belief.

Paul Allison
HS of Art & Design

Editors' Note

We see the above pieces as potentially opening a dialogue among Project members about Writing Project beliefs and directions--and, certainly, about other issues of importance to members.

The Newsletter welcomes--even urges--readers (locally and nationally) to respond to either or both of the essays written by Chris and Paul.

Our final issue for the year will appear late in June. The deadline for your responses is May 15, 1987. Send them to:

NEWSLETTER
New York City Writing Project
Lehman College
Bronx, New York 10468

If you have an idea for a response and wish to discuss it, call Marcie Wolfe at (212) 960-8758.