



# The New York City Writing Project Newsletter

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## A Note From the Editors

In July, I participated in the London Advanced Institute. It was exhilarating to be part of a group that collaborated in an exploration of how people come to be readers, and in an examination of how this investigation could influence the way we approach the use of language in the classroom. Although this course as conceived by Ed Osterman and Marcie Wolfe was billed as advanced, implying that everyone had been through some form of training in the philosophy and practice of the Writing Project, I find that now I am, happily, again a beginner. I say beginner because I am once again trying out new ideas and need to talk about them. I feel that I am going through a process of renewal in my own classroom and in my desire to share ideas with other teachers. I find I am revising--rethinking and reshaping--the way I want to use reading and writing in a language arts class. This happens as I write my lessons, scribble in my teaching journal, and discuss my experiences with others. I have discovered once again that in spite of the metaphysical distress I suffer in accommodating new ideas, I enjoy being part of a community of readers and writers; I have a lot to learn from my students and colleagues.

This is the year for the New York City Writing Project to reaffirm its commitment to professional growth. Teachers who have returned to the classroom invigorated and revived after participating in Project workshops--either this past summer or in a previous year--have new ideas and questions about teaching, writing, and learning. The new approaches that they bring to teaching have generated changes in their classroom which keep leading to further experimentation. Teachers share what they learn in their classrooms through monthly meetings, the newsletter, new courses, new presentations, and new membership. This is what makes the Project a vital entity. Our future accomplishments depend on the continuation of

our mutual concern and willingness to collaborate in the Project and in our schools.

Michael Simon  
HS of Art & Design

## In The Culloden School

I've got this one.  
Let's take that one.  
Would you sit at our dinner table,  
Miss?

What would you like to see?  
We'll start with the top form, then  
we'll go all the way round to the infants.  
Good morning. This is Beverly. She's  
from America. She's here to study and  
she's interested in seeing our writing.  
The moment we stepped into this  
British classroom we were surrounded by  
children--children grabbing our hands and  
holding on tightly, children asking us  
question after question, children leading  
us around. What a switch--children leading  
the teachers.

Firmly ensconced between two nine-year-olds, I was led on a visual and verbal tour of their school. With Lurece's chubby hand grasping one of mine, and Donna's smaller, more delicate hand in my other, I was transported to a world where learning was fluid and flowed from room to room.

My two guides seemed typical of the students in their school. Lurece, with her smiling round face and red cheeks, brought me to each teacher, gave a quick introduction, and then pulled me toward the books. She was in charge of the mission, and single-mindedly led the way.

Off we went to the top form, stepping around children working on the floor, around their tables and chairs, and right to the shelves of books. Piled one on top of each other were books of various sizes and titles. Lurece quickly took one of the books lying on top and opened it up. Donna, however, let go of my hand, and sorted through the rainbow of choices in front of

her, searching for titles or peer authors that she knew. Both girls opened their books and started to read them aloud. Lurece, hesitantly sounding out each word, was helped by Donna, who was able to read quickly and easily, until Donna went off to the side to read a book by herself. Lurece slowly and carefully continued reading to me, waiting for me to fill in the many words she did not know. A few moments later, the girls consulted each other and decided it was time to move on to the next level.

As they pulled me across the courtyard to get to the middle form rooms, I commented on the pond we were walking past. This led to an animated explanation of how they had made the pond.

First we dug this big hole in the ground. Then we put in this black material so the water stays in.

Here, look here, you can see a bit of it in this corner.

Then we put all these plants in. They had to go through holes we made in the plastic. The water went in, and we had the pond.

Look, here, we also put in these clay blocks around the side, so it has a wall.

That's all there is to it. Then we had a pond.

Donna, jumping back from the edge of the pond, took my hand and we were back on course.

As we entered the next set of rooms, Donna flitted away to talk with friends and to see what they were doing. Lurece, on the other hand, never left my side. Patiently, she introduced me to each teacher, carefully explaining where I was from and the purpose of my visit. As soon as we went to the bookshelves, Donna came back to us, drawn to the selection of reading material. This time, Lurece chose a book, ran her fingers over the smooth, clear, tacky back covering, and sounded out the name of the author. She looked around the room, put the book back on the shelf, and repeated the same behavior with the next three books. As before, Donna chose a book and went off to the privacy of a corner, leaving me to figure out what Lurece had in mind. Lurece, with a fourth book in her hand, soon looked up at me with

a grin and asked if I would like to have the author read his own work. How could I refuse? Off she went to find the writer. When she returned, she had a stocky, tow-headed boy in hand.

Jeremy, this is Beverly. She's from America and she wants to hear you read from your book.

Proudly, Jeremy read from his book, with Lurece checking to see if my face reflected the pleasure she felt. Donna came over, ready to assist if need be, but Jeremy competently read through his book about spiders, stopping only long enough to show me the pictures. As soon as he read the last page and received my compliments, he went back to the other side of the room to continue his work.

Once again, I was taken by the hand. This time, I was propelled to the infant room.

By now, Donna was getting impatient. Her small, wiry body jumped, skipped, and hopped as we headed across the courtyard. Lurece, calm and purposeful as ever, pushed open the door and brought me to the teacher. Our introductions over, we headed for the shelves of books, being careful not to step on any puzzle pieces or drawing paper. Here were the children's first books. As the three of us thumbed through them, the struggle that had taken place was clear. Each page had one picture on it. Written clearly and carefully, in a teacher's handwriting, was a two-or three-word sentence. Scrawled below, in crayon letters than spread all over the page, was the author's first attempts at copying his own text. I could only wonder at the amount of concentration that had gone into those books.

As Donna scampered off to do a puzzle, Lurece confidently read three of these books to me. Then she spotted a boy she knew and called him over. Here stood Michael, about four years old, with red hair and a freckled face. Shyly, and very softly, he picked up one of the books and read each word to me. He struggled to make sense of what he himself had written, trying to use his own pictures as clues to unlock those mysterious scribblings. When he faltered and looked to Lurece, she carefully read the unknown word to him. In

his own short sentences and primitive drawings, Michael's book told us of his admiration for his older sister. As he shyly went back to his playing, I asked Lucece if she remembered the first time she ever wrote a book.

Oh, yes. It was quite difficult. Making the letters was so hard. It looked just like this book. But now, my letters are good. I don't read so well, but I still write my books. Michael will get better. So will I.

Beverly Marcus  
Seward Park HS

## An Ideal Reading/Writing Classroom

I've worked as a nurse's aide, a waiter, a legal assistant, and, of course, as a teacher, and the only one lacking the setting and supplies needed to do a good job is, of course, teaching. As a legal assistant, I had a small carpeted office and unlimited use of a Xerox machine. As a teacher, I can use a second-rate copier only because I'm friends with the secretary. As a nurse's aide, I had a closet full of supplies for my patients; as a teacher, I have to buy my own stapler and markers. As a waiter, I know a lot of money was spent to create the right ambience. As a teacher, I have to work to make my classroom somewhat attractive, but no matter what is done there's no making silk purses out of the sows' ears we're told to teach in.

This past summer, a group of us (Robin Cohen, Susan Herron, Joyce Ludwig, Beverly Marcus, Peggy O'Brien, and Ron Wardall) at the London Advanced Institute was asked to imagine an ideal reading/writing classroom in a world where students and teachers were valued enough to be provided with an appropriate setting for their work. What follows is our dream classroom, a place where form follows function and people have abundant opportunities to grow as teachers and learners. Some aspects are of course fanciful, but others will fall into the realm of the possible when we become more assertive about the fact that if environment is important in law offices and restaurants, it's also important in schools.

We envision a larger than average room with lots of windows. There are activity centers: a reading center with bookcases holding a wide assortment of books, magazines and student publications (arranged so the covers are displayed) and comfortable chairs; a computer center with 20 computers and 5 printers (1 letter-quality and 4 dot-matrix). The computers and printers are super high-tech--they operate silently; a writing center of movable desks with lots of materials for drafting and revision; a conferencing center. In the middle of the room is a sunken amphitheater with three carpeted levels for seating and a small stage at the bottom for whole class activities.

Around the room are plants, bulletin boards decorated with student writing, student publications, graphics and illustrations. In a corner is an empty bird cage with the door left open. Under the cage is a sink, a small refrigerator and a hot plate. In another corner is a telephone and a VCR/TV setup.

Teachers have four classes, four days a week, with Friday devoted to enrichment activities. There are 20 students in a one-year elective class. It is a mixed-ability class with a reading range of no more than 3 years. The class environment emphasizes trust and cooperation and high expectations that fit the individual's potential.

We'll use a contract system in which students and teachers negotiate activity projects having flexible time frames.

We'll have regularly scheduled conferences with the kids to discuss progress and problems.

There's a balance between whole-class, small group and individual projects. Whole class work includes discussions, adult and student presentations, guest speakers, pre-writing and mini-lessons. Small group work includes reading groups, group writing activities, improvisations and drama. Class publications extend beyond the classroom to include ongoing school publications distributed to other classes, schools and the community.

Joel Goldstein  
Winthrop JHS

## Writing: A Chemical Reaction

The notion of learning through writing has not often been applied to the teaching of chemistry. As a teacher of Regents Chemistry, it was a challenge to use some of the techniques presented weekly at the Writing Project's workshop. The following is an assignment and some samples of the pieces the students wrote, and my perception of their usefulness in the teaching-learning process.

Since writing in the content areas has been one of the goals in the NYC schools these past two years, the students in my two classes are accustomed to a Write Now exercise at the beginning, middle or end of the period which requires a straightforward response to typical essay questions such as:

1. How is the net reaction different from the reaction mechanism?
2. Describe two factors which are necessary for an effective collision between two molecules.
3. Explain why increasing the temperature, concentration or pressure increases the reaction rate between molecules.

These are examples of essay questions on the topic of reaction mechanism which I had given to the class just prior to one of the early workshop presentations on point of view writing. I moved into applying this technique by saying to the class the following day, Let's make the Write Now a more interesting assignment requiring a little creative thinking. Imagine you are a molecule of  $H_2$  and you are trying to avoid reaction with a molecule of  $I_2$ . Write a piece about your adventure using the information you have on the factors which determine whether or not a reaction will occur. Write whatever comes to mind. Use your notes and/or textbook for information if you need to. I will write along with you.

Some students began immediately; others needed gentle prodding. Following the protocol given at the workshop, after ten minutes I stopped and asked, Who would like to share what you wrote? No one was willing. I said, Okay, I'll read my piece, and I did. Immediately many hands

were raised and a number of students read their pieces aloud. Everyone enjoyed listening to the stories of the  $H_2$  and the  $I_2$  molecule. Some students likened them to a man and woman, others to a fight between rival gangs, one to different kinds of cars!

When I took the writings home and reflected on the purpose they served, I came to the conclusion that the process of sifting the facts and theories they had learned into an imaginative story both clarified the material for them and revealed to me that they understood or did not understand the material. These are excerpts from some of the pieces:

B.G.: I am in a hydrogen molecule car on a highway full of iodine cars. I am trying to stay away from these cars because they will take my hydrogen car and their iodine car and form a hydrogen iodine car. I don't want that. I will move in wide open space on the highway where there are very few cars. I will go to a city where the air pressure is very low. I will also stay away from the sun. If I do these things, I might not collide with these iodine cars.

S.R.: It was a dark and stormy night. Those iodine molecules were out in force. I didn't want to get involved with them. I wasn't ready for a rumble. Me and my friend were traveling, suddenly they were on us. It looked like a collision, but we weren't smacked together at the right angle. They tried again. It was a direct hit.

The only reason we weren't connected with them was because they didn't have enough energy to do the job. That didn't stop them though. They put pressure on us. They called more of their gang members. We escaped by sheer luck. Then they caught us on a small platform. There wasn't much surface area left. Oh no, this looks like the end. Arrgh!!!!

W.S.: Mr. Hydrogen was invited to a party at a friend's house. He was very excited. Mr. Hydrogen put on his best clothes and started off to the party.

When Mr. Hydrogen got to the party, he met his good friend  $O_2$ , who was giving the

party. He was having a good time, until the most beautiful Iodine stepped into the room. Mr. Hydrogen had heard of her, and there were rumors that she had an unusual attraction to other well-known hydrogens.

Mr. Hydrogen was getting nervous. The temperature was rising in the room, and his energy was getting unusually fast. There were more and more molecules pushing to get in and the concentration was rising so much, Mr. Hydrogen and Iodine got too close together and all of a sudden they became one as  $2HI$ .

It is evident that these pieces illustrate a grasp of concepts such as activation energy, correct orientation, activated complex and the effects of pressure,

concentration and temperature on reaction rate. On a quiz following this writing exercise, a number of poor students got better grades than they usually do.

It seemed to me that the process of integrating the material into the expressive mode, combined with the attentiveness the students gave to the fun stories, which were read aloud, helped them retain both the vocabulary and the ideas. While the act of writing in this way clarifies the meaning for the writer, the youngster is studying without realizing it. When the pieces are shared, they further reinforce the concepts and vocabulary.

Shirley Solomon  
Far Rockaway HS

## Steal These Ideas

Once again, we invite you to steal these ideas....

1. As part of a unit on human development and genetics for a biology class, Carlos Delgado of DeWitt Clinton HS created the following journal topics:

- How do you feel about studying human development and genetics?
- How do you think learning about genetics will affect your views about sex?
- How has the study of genetics made you view genetic diseases and family planning?
- After studying human development and genetics, when do you think life begins?
- How has the study of this topic changed your ideas concerning abortion or has it?
- What ideas did you have that turned out to be false?

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2. Jeanie D. Kaplan, A.P. Health and Physical Education at Tilden H.S., and her students kept journals related to class hikes and other class activities. One class lesson involved a discussion of Walt Whitman's Song of the Open Road. The homework for that lesson was:

- Write a letter to Walt Whitman answering whether or not you would take the Open Road with him.
- Write a song or rap about the Open Road.

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3. Anna E. Miklos of Walton H.S. designed the following project to be used with an American history 2 class studying the end of the prosperous 1920's and the Depression of the 1930's.

After reading a section in their text, students were given this quote by President Herbert C. Hoover: We in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land... The slogan of progress is changing from the full dinner pail to the full garage.

Students were asked to analyze these words, first in a discussion and then in writing. Next, they were asked to develop a chart identifying the factors and conditions that support or refute the quotation. Here are some sample statements made by students:

### Prosperity In The 1920's Reasons for Optimism

- Introduction of assembly line production
- use of new sources of energy
- time and motion studies for industrial efficiency
- new advertising and marketing techniques
- increased industrialism
- urbanization
- freedom for women, right to vote, new jobs (clerical), changing styles in hair and clothes
- variety of recreations (radio, phonograph, movies, spectator sports)

### Reasons for Anxiety

- overproduction
- boredom and accidents from over-specialization
- decline in coal production--closing coal mines--unemployment
- work related stress
- conspicuous consumption and over-spending
- unfair distribution of wealth
- pollution
- crowding
- changing family structure

Upon completion of the chart on prosperity in the 1920's, students were asked to write on one of the following points of view using the same time period.

- a. A manufacturer using assembly line production
- b. A worker on an assembly line
- c. A coal miner
- d. A farmer
  
- e. An artist in an advertising agency
- f. A family who made a move to the city from a rural area.
- g. A salesperson in a chain store
- h. A modern woman
- i. A teen-ager

In the next activity students were

asked to relate past and present events. Students wrote reasons for optimism and anxiety in our present economic situation and then compared present conditions with conditions in the late 1920's, focusing on both similarities and differences.

As a final activity, the class organized interviews with older members of their families, community, or school about their memories of the Great Depression. First they prepared a series of questions to be used during the interviews:

- Where did you live during the 1930's?
- Were you working? Where? Were members of your family working? What kind of food did you eat? Did your family have to stand on food lines?
- What kind of recreation did your family have?
- (If your family had photos) What kind of clothes did they wear?

Tape-recorded interviews were played for the class; written interviews were read as class reports.

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Steal These Ideas is a regular feature of the NYCWP Newsletter. We invite you to submit any ideas you'd like to share with your colleagues.

Robin Cohen  
Martin L. King Jr. HS

### Writing + Math = Learning

My third period RCT math class is made up of seniors and super seniors who have not yet been able to pass the math RCT exam. They're a great group of students who have a lot of difficulty with math. One lesson I chose to do incorporated several different math functions that they all have done at one time or another. There was nothing in the assignment that they had never done before, mathematically speaking, except for the fact they have never had to put all the different functions together to solve one problem.

The class was asked to work separately, but told that they could talk to each other and ask questions if they wanted to. The class was asked to make up a budget based on a weekly salary of \$350.00. They

first had to figure out take-home pay by computing the amount of tax that would be taken out. They had to decide how they would split up the remaining money, and then draw a circle graph depicting how the money would be divided up; they had to do this by using percentages. The last part of the mathematical assignment asked them to determine how much money would be spent on each part of their circle graph.

The class accepted this as a challenge. Some kids knew exactly how to get started, others needed prodding, but they all really tried. They asked millions of questions. As it turned out, I think the assignment might have been a little bit too difficult for them. If they're told what to do mathematically, they don't seem to have that much difficulty, but when they have to determine what to do on their own, it seems too hard for them. The class

worked so hard and furiously that I had to continue the lesson the next day to give them time to complete the assignment and do the writing. They were extremely enthusiastic at the end of the period about continuing the next day.

The second day they didn't seem to need the entire period to finish their graphs, which, surprisingly enough, turned out to be terrific. When they were all finished with the graphs, I asked them to write about the process. They were asked to write briefly how they determined where and how their money would be spent, to name all the mathematical operations used to determine their budgets, and finally, to explain how they felt determining their own budget. The written responses were terrific. They didn't write well and they didn't write that much, but what they wrote was great. They really showed that they were thinking. You can learn a lot when you ask a class to write after they've worked on math problems.

With my class, the writing served many purposes. Most importantly, they had to

think about what they had done. The more they think about what they do, the more sense it should make for them. My class seemed to enjoy telling me how they made up their budgets and rather than talk out loud, they were able to write how they felt. Many of them are embarrassed to speak out loud, but when given the opportunity to write their feelings, they seem more comfortable. They have a lot of difficulty writing grammatically acceptable sentences, but they knew I wasn't looking for how they wrote, but rather for what they wrote.

Doing a project like this with my class has given me the motivation to try similar projects with my other classes. I know that in the future I will continue to do experiments of this nature. It will not only help me understand my students' feelings and mathematical fears, but will allow them to express their feelings and fears. Math can be very scary. Maybe writing can help alleviate some of the fear.

Ellin Singer  
Tilden HS

### In This Picture I See A Gypsy Sleeping...

My experience with remedial writing classes has been that any experiential or hands-on type of work is the most effective motivation for writing. Since I am currently involved in the Lincoln Center Institute, in which the arts and humanities are integrated in all curricula, I thought that I could create an experiential project combining art with ideas from the Writing Project.

My aim was to give students a sense of ease in approaching unfamiliar works of art, to allow them to fantasize about the possibilities within each picture, to discover symbols they could relate to, to notice what pleased them about the work, to notice what made them uncomfortable about the work and what elements seemed out of place. As an introduction, we spent a day discussing color and how it shows up in our lives. Students discovered the colors important to them by looking at the colors they surround themselves with, and the colors they wear in their clothing. We discussed how certain colors suggest

certain feelings and ideas. We then spent a day on symbols. First, we talked about the broad symbols in the world around us--signs, hand signals, words, etc., then more personal symbols which represent us--religious symbols, radios, combs, etc.

The central activity in this project was a lesson in which groups of three students shared a folder containing a surrealist painting on a postcard. The directions were for each student to study the picture and respond to the following questions in writing:

1. What do you see? What specific images do you see?
2. What story does the picture tell you? (Don't worry about being right or wrong, or about what another student thinks about this picture. Tell your story--use your imagination!)
3. What images or elements seem disparate or out of place in this picture? What images are easy to understand or comfortable?
4. What do you think the painter was thinking about when painting this picture?

5. How does this picture make you feel?

6. Which elements in the painting please you (color, objects, details, characters, place, format)? Which displease you? Why?

7. If you were to give this picture another title, what would you call it?

8. What questions come up for you about this picture? What questions would you like to ask?

When deciding on the questions, I asked myself, what is most important about the surrealist school of art? I wanted to guide students in understanding that the surrealists were an extremely intellectual group of artists who gave their works titles meant to provoke thought, whose art had a playfulness about it. In surrealism, things often seem out of place; I wanted students to be aware of this, also.

Each student wrote silently about the picture in their folder. (I included Magritte, Dali, DeChirico, Miro, and other surrealists.) Then they switched papers with another student in the group--someone who wrote about the same painting. After reading each other's work, they went back to their own writing and made additions. The students wrote and read silently in the group. I wanted to have each student feel a silent support team--a sense of we're all in this strange experience together. What many students noticed when they saw what their group members wrote was the similarity of ideas among them, even without discussion. They noticed that they were aware of similar images and things that felt disturbing.

After our in-depth look at the artwork in class, we took a trip to the Museum of Modern Art and saw firsthand the paintings they wrote about. They could not believe these were the real paintings. They expected many of the paintings to be larger or smaller. They felt as if they owned the painting they wrote about. I found that the students were eager to approach paintings that they had not seen before. I gave each of them a list of my questions before we went into the museum so they had a hook for their viewing.

I have used a similar approach with film and photography. My students seem to respond best to writing when it is combined with visual stimuli.

#### Responses to Surrealist Paintings

1. In this picture I see a Gypsy sleeping, it looks like she is very tired that she was all worn out. It seems like she was on a journey with her pet lion and had to stop and rest by the Sea...It is like a story about a stranger or a foreigner that is seeking something or someone...Everything in this picture is easy to understand. Except what I don't understand is why a vase is next to her. Maybe she is using it to drink out of. But what I keep asking myself is why a vase. (by Maryanne)

2. In this painting I see four stop watches, each of them are very flexible except one which is turned over with the front not showing. On the back of it is a bunch of ants. The second watch is next to the first one, both on top of a square block of wood or earth...On top of this watch is a fly...I feel that the face on the rock, the water in the desert, and the melted clocks are out of place. Also I don't think anything in this picture is comfortable for me...This picture makes me feel close to death because it reminds me of what the world will probably look like after a nuclear war. (by Patrick)

3. I see a picture of an eye. In this eye I see blue skies and clouds. Someone is looking at the sky and how beautiful the clouds blend with the sky. The eye just looks as if it has no feeling at all it just keeps right on looking... (by Sharron)

Marlene Dodes  
Beach Channel HS

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## On Teaching

The scene goes something like this. I bring my car in for repairs, usually about 3:30 while I'm on my way home. My mechanic invariably says, You're home already? What a racket! You teachers work half a day and you're always complaining. When are you going to get a real job? I feign laughter but really want to argue with him.

Several months ago, I read an interview with Judd Hirsch, the actor, while he was filming the movie, Teachers. Hirsch went on and on about how selfish and cruel teachers are. I was furious. Where does he get off blackballing an entire profession? What makes acting so pure and selfless?

Recently, Mayor Koch told a group of high school students that New York City teachers will get a raise when they start working longer hours. After all, he claimed, teachers only work half a day.

These thoughts reflect an issue that has come to disturb me: the widespread hostility and cynicism towards teachers that seem to have become a national past-time in America. As a teacher, I can hardly contain my rage when people make such thoughtless remarks. I want to drag them into school with me; I want to show them how wrong they are; I want them to try teaching for just one week. Perhaps then they would begin to have some sense of how difficult, complex, and frustrating being a teacher in the 1980's can be.

Just consider. In order to teach in the New York City school system, a person must hold a master's degree and then in order to reach the top salary, attain 30 credits beyond a master's. That's almost as much schooling as a lawyer has. Yet, you will not find a teacher anywhere who is earning the kind of money the average lawyer makes. And consider the popular charge of our mayor: Teachers work half a day. For eleven years, I taught five classes of English a day. Usually, three of those classes were different courses. Therefore, each day of the week I had to prepare three different lessons and be responsible for three different courses of study. I also had to teach composition. I had about 34 students in a class.

Multiplied by five, I had 170 students. That means I read about 170 first drafts and then 170 revisions every time I assigned a major piece of writing. It might have taken me up to eight minutes to think about and respond in writing to each piece. Again, think about that in terms of 170. Consider that figure along with the current demand that students write more than ever (a demand with which I am in total agreement). When does Mr. Koch think all this reading, commenting, and preparation take place? During two 40-minute free periods, of one which is usually sacrificed to cover a class for an absent teacher? Obviously, 15 fully planned and written out lessons a week as well as the reading and responding to essays, stories, and homework (I haven't even mentioned the clerical work!) cannot be done thoughtfully in two free periods a day. The bulk of my work was done at home. On weeknights. On Saturdays. On Sundays. Hours of it. Anyone who believes a teacher's work day ends at 3:00 is a fool. Or a liar.

Does the public have any idea what I faced five days a week? I worked in the shell of a building. One hallway was boarded up, barely hiding the scars of a major fire that destroyed our library last November, burning thousands of books and memories. Just outside these charred walls were the ashes of our minischool, which was set ablaze the previous December, a Christmas gift from some hoodlums in the neighborhood. On the second floor of the school, there is an unused room, also boarded up, that was burned to a crisp in the summer of 1983. Three fires in two years. I saw this daily; I smelled it daily. So did my students.

Does the public have any idea how I felt on those hot June days when the custodian sent steam raging up so he could use up his oil allotment? I staggered into the hall to quench my thirst but had to be satisfied with swallowing my own saliva because for two years the only working water fountain in the building was in the cafeteria on the fifth floor and I taught on the third floor. Of course, it is assumed that the students never get thirsty since none of the hall fountains they can

use work either. Endless complaints to the Board of Education have done nothing to relieve this problem.

How many employees in the private sector would share lavatories with the opposite sex? Several times last year, as I went to the men's room, I had to wait five minutes to relieve myself, because two women teachers were using the men's room since their bathroom had plumbing problems for two weeks and was broken intermittently for half a semester. When I finally got to enter the men's room, I couldn't wash my hands, because the current custodian refused to buy soap for the special dispenser the previous custodian installed.

A colleague of mine spends an entire 40-minute period each day stamping the word LATE on late passes. This is her building assignment. If she should not show up one day, because she wants to work with a student who needs extra help, a note of reprimand is placed in her file by the assistant principal. Do taxpayers know that teacher time and energy are wasted on such jobs?

Ten teachers' cars were stolen from in front of the school building last year. This is not counting the number of teachers who left school at the end of a day to find cars without batteries. My principal promised to do something about it, but the entire year went by without any change. I was still parking five blocks away from school just to protect my car.

I catalogue these horrors, because I feel one must be aware of all these events—the salary, the workload, the work conditions—if one is to understand why teachers are angry and why they feel misunderstood. Given the enormous workload, the conditions under which many teachers must work each day, and a salary that hardly seems commensurate with education and the amount of responsibility the average teacher has, is it any wonder that so many of us are angry? We deserve better. Still, we haven't seen much improvement in our jobs, because there is no public support for teachers.

Why does the American public seem so indifferent to the plight of its teachers? Is it that all people, having been students, harbor long held resentments

against the entire profession? Is it that many people truly believe that anyone can teach? After all, there seems to be no mystery to teaching as there is to law, medicine, or auto mechanics. Just get up there and talk, right? Is it because teaching was always a woman-dominated profession, and public attitudes toward the profession are also a reflection of negative attitudes toward women? Could it be that people regard teaching as more of a calling than a profession? Do people think of the teacher in the same way they think of a priest or rabbi, someone who has sacrificed worldly concerns like salary or working conditions for helping young people? If so, why don't we command the same respect?

I don't know the answer, but I do know that there is no future without our children, and in a society which contains a large number of one-parent homes, teachers are more influential than ever before. Indeed, in an average school year, in addition to imparting textbook knowledge, teachers function as mothers, fathers, older siblings, nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, priests, and coaches. Suddenly, the average public school is being asked to do far more than ever before and, along with that, so is the teacher. We are no longer just responsible for teaching skills and concepts; most of us find that we must also deal with health matters, sex education, and the inculcation of traditional values. Many of these were once the sole responsibility of the parents; it no longer seems to be so. In fact, in many cases, the teacher is the only stable force in the child's life. We do all these jobs under shabby working conditions, lack of community support, and the constant sniping of the media. Yet, when we complain or ask for a better living wage, the public shrugs its shoulders, and the mayor holds us up for public ridicule.

It seems to me that the American public is perfectly willing to spend millions of dollars on bombs for defense or on items that fulfill our fantasies and pleasures, but ask them to spend money on education or to listen to and support their teachers, and they are rarely to be found.

I have a fantasy, though. My fantasy involves parents and industry working with teachers, and curriculum being determined by administrators, teachers, and students alike. My fantasy envisions giving power and prestige to those who are still in the classroom. Most importantly, I wish for the day when being a teacher will be as desirable as being a doctor, a lawyer, or

a computer analyst. Yes, doctors do save lives physically. But a good teacher saves lives intellectually and emotionally. Isn't it about time we acknowledged that fact, nurtured it, and honored it?

Ed Osterman  
Writing  
Teachers Consortium

## Writing Teachers Writing

At recent Project meetings, teachers have been asked to write about something that they've noticed in their classrooms over the year, or about learning in their classrooms. Sharing writing in small groups has been an important and enjoyable aspect of Project meetings. Here are pieces by some of our own.

\* \* \* \* \*

I want to write about the snags--those stuck points that, in the end, in many ways shaped the book *Sondra* and I have been writing.

I stumbled across the first one in the fall of 1982, when I sat down to write a narrative account--an organizing draft--of events in the classroom of Audre Allison, the teacher with whom I had spent the most time in Shoreham-Wading River. I wanted to pick out, from among my masses of data (fieldnotes, student writing, Audre's journal, etc.) those incidents or quotes that would show a reader just how wonderful Audre was. And I did (and still do) think Audre was wonderful.

In fact, watching Audre, I had come to appreciate a kind of teaching I, too, practiced: teaching made up of trials and errors, stumblings and hopes and sometimes joy--teaching which, in my own classroom, had often troubled me (so many errors, so much uncertainty), but which, in Audre's classroom, seemed, somehow, just right. In writing about Audre, then, I was writing about myself as well.

The first pages of the narrative went well enough: Audre and her students wrote, discussed their writing processes, started to be writers together. But then I hit the first snag. On about the third day of school, Audre's 11th graders started to

clamor for test practice (for Regents, SATs, etc.), and Audre, hating to do it, interrupted the writing abruptly to introduce some review exercises neither she nor I thought had any value.

This incident, in one form or another, was repeated again and again during the year and, writing about Audre's classroom, I didn't know how to handle it. I wanted to be honest and accurate, but I also wanted to show all the great writing and revising and groupwork that was going on--didn't want to let the damned tests intrude on it--in fact didn't want to write about the tests at all. So I wrote a description of the first weeks of class without mentioning them. I concentrated on the writing, stubbornly sticking to what I wanted to see, ignoring what I didn't.

Sondra read this draft, and said there was something odd about it. She wasn't sure what: some tension, something unsaid. Damn right, I thought, and with a sigh rewrote the whole thing, this time heading right into the issue: What happens when an 11th grade teacher wants to teach writing but has to deal with the tests that plague the school system?

The picture of Audre's classroom that emerged in this second version wasn't as neat or as unambiguously upbeat, but it was certainly truer to what had actually happened that year and, writing about it, I was forced to begin to deal with Audre's anger, frustration and distress about the tests--and with my own.

That narrative became the basis of one section of Audre's chapter in Through Teachers' Eyes, and the pattern it established was one Sondra and I were to encounter often as we wrote about the teachers we had studied. Again and again we returned not to the smooth, untroubled moments of teaching, but to those moments

of dissonance, of tension, of conflict between what we and the teachers were aiming for and what we were actually able to achieve. For it was in these moments, we thought, that teachers revealed what they most cared about.

Nancy Wilson  
Lehman College

\* \* \* \* \*

Above the lake the great mountain stretched up in a catena of vast green slabs, as if twenty golf courses had been laid end-to-end and then tipped up at a forty degree angle so that each slid a little over the one below forming a series of giant shingles.

We climbed steadily, for three hours up a rocky trail. It began to rain. We pushed on. Below, the ferry and the sailboats, the dock and the houses, the people and the sheep, seemed all in place and at peace, the unconscious participants in a pastoral watercolor.

Distance rendered everything tranquil, though one of those tiny, well-placed pieces might even now be experiencing a slight queasiness that would be the first faint herald of cancer of the pancreas, and in one of those neat, carefully gardened, red-roofed houses, something might have just been done that could never be undone.

Ronald Wardall  
Norman Thomas HS

\* \* \* \* \*

When the St. Agnes library hosted a celebration for the adult learners and volunteer tutors last June, my writing group presented a publication of their writing to the library. The anthology wasn't very fancy--a piece by each member of the group, a table of contents, a yellow cover. The presentation of the publication was only a quick moment in a long evening of emotional testimonials, international food, and laughter, but our group was proud; although their reading levels ranged from 1.8 to 5.0, all of them had written, revised, proofread, put the pieces in order, voted on a title.

In the subsequent weeks, an announce-

ment from two other students, Charles and Tyrone, came out to all groups. They would be in charge of producing a regular St. Agnes journal with writing done by the adult learners at the library, all of whom were invited to submit their pieces for publication.

When I returned from vacation, the first issue had come out. There were a number of pieces--on what it was like to be in a literacy program, responses to world events, descriptions of goals for the future, and my student Valerie's piece on growing up in Jamaica--Living on a Sugar Plantation. There was a table of contents. There was a green cover. The students were reading it--not only their own contribution, but the others'--and the journal, like our little publication before, was being used by the tutors as a reading text in the groups.

Now I hear Charles as he goes from group to group, reminding everyone to contribute to the journal. He and the other student editors are thinking about how the journal might grow and change. I like to think that the presentation of our little publication last June was a moment of learning for Charles, Tyrone, and the other students at St. Agnes--a point when they saw that their words could be made significant in print, read and enjoyed by others. They felt the power in that. And took over.

Marcie Wolfe  
HS Support Services

## Input: Writing

As a result of her participation in the Writing Teachers Consortium at Walton, Gloria Lindenbaum created a writing project for students in her Computer Literacy class which involved writing to learn computer programming and writing and revising letters on the computer. Following are her notes and comments on this project.

Preparation for the project. Students wrote complaints and/or compliments to the computer in their journals twice a week for two weeks. The journal writings became the source for a personal letter written from each student to the computer, which

was written at home in proper format. Three letters were given as homework assignments to get students used to a format which could be transferred into a program. Journal entries often expressed students' problems in working with the computer:

One problem I got is with the input statement. When you type a question, your not suppose to type in a question mark in the quotation marks, why? Is it because of the input statement its self. Let's say that if I want to input that's a nice name it will put a question mark. What if I just put Print that's a nice name. When I signed up for this computer class I expected us to just type a question and have the computer give you the answer. But I've found out it's not like that.

#### Execution of the project.

Day 1: Students received a handout covering the format of a personal letter and a computer program for that letter.

Day 2: Students entered the program from the handout and ran it on a video screen.

Day 3: Students wrote letters to the computer on the computer in program format, using their journals and the sample program as source material.

Day 4: Students completed, rewrote, and corrected errors in their letters while I circulated, giving individual instruction. During this time, some students were able to produce two letters--one personal and the other a complaint/compliment. Then their programs were run on the video screen. Finally, students learned additional computer terms to enable them to use the printer and a new method for spacing. Here is an example of one student's letter:

Dear Computer,

I am seriously thinking about working with computers for a career. It is fun to work with. I enjoy facing the challenge of breaking new programs.

Even if I do not choose computer programming as a career, I will do my best to learn more about them. Maybe the computer and I can become very good friends.

Your friend,  
Yolanda

Day 5: Students ran their programs, two at a time, on the printer, while other students corrected their programs to include new computer terms taught. It took approximately one week for the entire class to get their printouts.

Day 6: Students learned to use READ and DATA statements in their letters, and then rewrote their letters to include these statements.

Day 7: Students learned to use a terminator--conditional and unconditional branches in their letters.

```
Example: 10 IF A$ = XYZ THEN END
          -or-
          10 IF A$ = XYZ THEN 60
          60 END
```

Comments. What I initially thought was a two day project turned into a unit plan which lasted seven days and which presented old/new computer terms in a new and refreshing way. Writing programs with the same familiar output can get boring. Using letter writing varied the output and allowed for individual finished products which the students could display. In addition, this exercise served as an introduction not only to programming, but to word processing.

Gloria Lindenbaum  
Walton HS

#### How I Spent My Summer Vacation

All during the month of July, I diligently inhaled writing process, groups, revision, literature logs, journal writing and free-writing.

Now it was time to put what I had learned into practice with my five ninth-year classes of varying abilities. I had doubts--grave doubts--but I began.

During the first four weeks of this year I had my students do freewriting, guidelines writing and memory chain writing. They wrote in class, met in groups, revised in class, and met in groups again. They did a few writing process pieces. I did no collecting and no correcting. While they wrote, I either wrote too or

held conferences. Each day I sat in on a different group, trying to concentrate on those which were not working cohesively.

I assured my students that no one would look at what they had written in their journals and that how they punctuated and spelled would be virtually ignored for the first part of the year. Interestingly, however, I noticed in a few groups the passing around of journal notebooks with peer comments such as, 'You used too many `ands,' or 'You need some more commas.'

At the beginning of the next week, the fifth week, I will collect their work for the first time. I asked my students to turn in the best of their first three pieces to be graded, although I will still not red-pencil anything.

Responses to my teaching style so far show the yeas running ahead of the nays by about 8 to 1.

You went to school to learn how to teach this way? You shoulda done it two years ago when I first used to have you, a student in one of my remedial classes remarked recently.

This is fun, a student in my S.P. class said. He nodded his head. Not bad at all.

I have been taking two or three groups out of my room each time in order to keep the room as quiet as possible. I've been setting those groups up in the hall or in nearby unused classrooms. Teachers and administrators have walked by. They look but no one has said anything so far, so I guess the groups outside the room have been behaving according to school standards.

At first, I discussed the program only with the English A.P. Then a few teachers, noticing my strange behavior and methods of teaching this year, began to ask me questions. I explained what I was doing. A few more have since sat in on my classes to watch and a couple have already decided to introduce group work and other Writing Project methods into their classes.

Best of all, I can't remember when I have had as much time to myself.

A friend of mine in the English department had just finished complaining about how busy the first four weeks had

been and how he no longer had time to go to the bathroom. Another teacher complained that if the pile of ungraded papers she had on her desk at home wasn't reduced soon, her marriage would probably end in divorce.

How about you? she asked, turning to hear my complaint.

I didn't dare smile. This hasn't been a bad beginning, I underemphasized. I won't be collecting my first papers until the beginning of next week.

I couldn't repeat the exact words they used in turning on me, but it went something like this:

What do you mean, 'first papers?'

What have you been doing all this time?!!

I've been feeling a little guilty, actually, but a lot happier. By sitting in on groups, and occasionally sharing my writing, I have learned more about my students in four weeks than I ever did over the course of the full year before. And I feel closer to them than I have to classes in the past.

I learned that one girl got married this summer and was sitting next to her brother-in-law in my class.

I learned that one boy was corresponding with a magazine fashion model he had fallen in love with from her pictures. He had a plan that would make him rich by the time he was nineteen--when he would ask her to marry him.

I learned that one boy thought I was a real cool teacher, even if I did always send letters home on him--because he deserved them.

I learned that one girl, upon visiting the Dominican Republic, was overcome by the great poverty there and felt the need to work through it in writing.

I learned that a boy and a girl in the same class had both recently lost their fathers and wanted to write about it and share it with their groups.

The jury is still out and will be for a while longer, but so far I am enjoying the most rewarding and least draining school term in many a year.

Martin Silver  
Wm. Alexander JHS 51K

## Letter From College

The night of September 8, 1985, the night before I was to begin teaching my first college course, I barely slept. Instead, I lay awake worrying. In addition to the usual beginning of term anxieties, I was plagued with a new worry--that somehow, despite my best efforts at concealment, my students would realize that they had in front of them, not the real college professor they had eagerly awaited, but that familiar and much despised being, a high school teacher. I was determined not to give myself away.

Now, three weeks into the term, I suspect that many of my students lay awake that night with worries quite similar to my own. Would they be able to act like college students or would they too, give themselves away? Almost all of them are 18 years old and fresh out of high school. Academic Skills 040 at 8:00 AM on Thursday, September 9 was their first college class ever. They are assigned to it because they have failed to pass both the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (known as the WAT) and the CUNY Reading Assessment Test (known as the RAT). For eight hours a week with me, they will receive only two credits. Every course in their program is remedial. If I'm barely a college teacher, they are barely college students.

They were so very quiet on the first day of class, whispering when required to say something, remaining silent when they had the option. They mumbled their names when I took attendance. The names were familiar to me. I thought, I've had these kids before--Angel Martinez, Diana Rodrigues, Denise Hudson, Michelle Jackson. I asked them to write me letters telling me something about themselves as readers and writers. After class when I read the letters, I was shocked. They wrote so poorly. A couple of them could barely eke out two or three sentences. One girl misspelled can't. Their writing reminded me of writing I'd seen from ninth graders. I knew them; I knew their writing.

But it is not like high school here, despite the familiar names and the familiar errors. The most startling difference is that the only thing I am asked to do for

my students is to teach them. I am not at all concerned with their transportation, their eligibility for various funds, their previous school records, their scores on standardized tests, their ID's, and the like. I am not free of these things because colleges are free of paperwork. On the contrary, there is quite a lot of complicated and time-consuming paperwork here. But other people are paid to take care of it--people who are not teachers. I was given a single piece of paper to begin to teach with--a handwritten list of my students.

It makes me feel very light and free to be a teacher. During the day, I think about my class and I think of what I might like to teach them. There are only 20 students in ACS 040, Section 7. I knew all their names after the first day. I can choose any book in the world to assign to them and the man in the bookstore will order it. No one has asked me what books I have ordered. My booklist is a secret between me and my students.

ACS 040 meets two hours a day, four days a week. When it seems like the right time in the session, we take a five or ten minute break. At a different time each day. I must give each of my students a grade at the end of the course, but there are no marking periods or report cards here. So I have decided not to grade any work. I will instead have conferences with my students from time to time to talk with them about their work. Our two hours together each day will be for reading, writing, talking, and listening.

I am told that out of the 20 students in my class perhaps two will graduate from college. I expect that this estimate is accurate. But even the 18 who drop out or flunk out will, if they stay for a while, have been given a chance to learn something. And their teachers will have been given a chance to teach them. I am too new here to be blase about this. I find myself wishing that everyone could go to college.

Carla Asher  
NYCWP

## Project Notes

Fairy tales may have happy endings, but real life is different. Or is it? Linette Moorman was cited by Donald Graves in the About Education column of the New York Times of Tuesday, September 10, 1985. The column, entitled, Making 'A Lot of Words' Tell a Story, describes the research project Graves directed, and tells of one of Linette's students who changed from a mumbling, second grade repeater to an author who concluded her piece saying that the protagonist, a little girl, now writes stories and lives happily ever after. She is just one of the children of our city who have found their voices under Linette's capable tutelage.

\* \* \* \* \*

I never had colleagues who were friends before.

It was a room full of people who had been teaching as long as I have, and they were all still enthusiastic, like me. I was no longer alone. It was magical.

One man's opinion, one woman's opinion. Yet they speak for many of us who have spent our July vacations with cramped fingers, muttering our way across the campus at Lehman College.

Maxene Kupperman and Ron Bleier participated in the Writing Teachers Consortium Summer Institute led by Mickey Bolmer and Helen Ogden. Both Maxene and Ron spoke of an increased confidence which they brought to their own writing and to classroom experimentation. Maxene described journal work with her students. I had never done personal, undirected writing. Now I've tried it. Every child wrote. They couldn't wait for their writing to be read. They did a really phenomenal job.

Both Maxene and Ron felt that the summer left them excited, eager, changed both personally and professionally. The Institute freed them, helped them to recognize the writer within, and they returned to Monroe HS ready to share their experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

The NYCWP has grown even more this year. Project in-service courses are now in 13 schools in all five boroughs.

In the Bronx, the Writing Teachers Consortium has moved into Jane Addams HS;

Ed Osterman and Gail Kleiner are running the course there. Follow-up I-Search courses are being run at DeWitt Clinton HS by Laura Pacher and Ronni Tobman, and at Walton HS by Chris Kissack and Helen Corchado.

Elaine Spielberg and Beth Greenberg are leading the WTC course at Park West HS in Manhattan. Also in Manhattan are follow-up courses at Julia Richman HS (Maura Gouck and Melanie Hammer, coordinators) and Seward Park HS (Fran Lacas and Beverly Marcus, coordinators).

The Project is in four schools in Brooklyn. Lillian Rossi and Laura Kramer are leading the WTC course at Erasmus Hall HS, and Robin Cohen and Bob Whitney are at Sarah J. Hale HS. Follow-up courses in Brooklyn are being run by Linette Moorman and Anthony Castelli at the South Shore/Canarsie combined course, and by Marilyn Wiener and Carol Handwerker at Tilden.

In Queens, Helen Ogden and Lydia Page are conducting the course at Franklin K. Lane. Follow-up courses are under the leadership of Meta Plotnik and Marlene Dodes at Beach Channel HS, and Toby Bird and Carol Rinzler at Far Rockaway.

Finally, the first Project course on Staten Island is at Curtis High School, run by Mickey Bolmer and Peggy O'Brien.

Lisa Rosenberg  
James Monroe HS;  
Melanie Hammer  
HS of Art & Design

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