



The New York City Writing Project Newsletter

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A Note From The Editors

Now that everyone's finished watching the World Series, we'd like to welcome all of you to the first newsletter of the 1986-87 year. We have returned from the most successful Writing Project summer yet, with five summer institutes running at Lehman College and one in Shoreham. In addition to the Writing Teachers Consortium, the High School Students Writing Project, and the Open Institute, NYCWP sponsored its second annual advanced institute in reading/writing connections, and its first summer institute for teachers in adult literacy programs. It's exciting to have this new area of expertise brought into the Project.

This issue of the newsletter reflects the increasingly eclectic interests of NYCWP members in language and literacy--their connections for us and for our students to content area learning, to the development of all of us as readers and writers. Several of the articles also reflect concern with the special needs of students who, for a variety of reasons, have found themselves on the periphery of the educational system and of their own literacy. And, for those of you who meant to keep learning logs during the World Series, but didn't, we have an article on writing and softball.

It was great to see new and familiar faces at the October and November Writing Project meetings. Once again, we'd like to invite all of you to help us continue to provide a forum for sharing our successes, struggles, and concerns as teachers. Write!

Writing as a Special Education

After a year teaching in the mainstream, I confronted half-forgotten difficulties upon my return to special education: reluctant, seemingly uninspired, fearful students unwilling to commit their supposed incompetence to the permanent,

public glare of paper and pen.

Special education classes present particular problems to the teacher of writing. Small class sizes make writing groups difficult. The inability of learning disabled students to abstract, or to distinguish the whole from its parts, makes synthesis (in writing or responding) difficult for them, as does their often limited vocabularies. Word reversals and memory deficits make writing a frightening, frustrating, changeable experience; what is known one moment may be unknown the next. These students bring a history of failure experiences and feelings of incompetence to the writing classroom. Frustration tolerance is usually low, and they have trouble staying with an activity. Doubts, insecurities, and weaknesses plague them. Limited life experiences dry the ink in their pens. Many feel they have nothing to say; those that hear an inner voice have few ways to organize the material that's inside their heads.

What could I do, I wondered, to help these students learn to write, and learn to value writing? They came to me at so many ability levels, from so many previous writing experiences, with so many weaknesses. I had to build their strengths, and their confidence, and their trust--in themselves, in me, in each other.

I begin my classes each year with a questionnaire. Student answers are duplicated, distributed, and shared. Questions range from the concrete (Who do you live with? What is your favorite TV show?) to the abstract (What is love?). The questions are personal, thought-provoking, and often intriguing. This year, I scattered a variety of questions about writing among the others. Do you like to write? What, why, do you like to write? What is your favorite piece? What would you like to learn this year? Their answers revealed a group of people eager to find a voice.

There was a lot of interest in vocabulary development. There was a strong core of students who liked to write, along with

those who told me succinctly, uncompromisingly, that they did not.

The questionnaire and ensuing class discussions revealed many of the obstacles my students face when they write and made them public property. Feelings and experiences were shared, and thus became less alienating. The foundations for trust were being laid. Most importantly, recognition of the importance of students' feelings and thoughts became a de facto aspect of the class.

So began the "scaffolding," the spiraling steps from student to student writer. Writing about the constructs needed for literacy, Courtney Cazden emphasizes that the scaffold must self-destruct gradually as the need lessens, and be replaced by newer structures for more complex constructions. With this in mind, I guided my class through a number of writing experiences within an intensive time frame, constant, unrelenting, varied. As new techniques or constructions were introduced, I modeled each step. I, too, was a member of the group: reader, writer, listener, and learner.

The students were assigned to write an autobiographical piece. This was received with groans. "Not your typical born in such and such hospital, live on this or the other street," I advised. "Think of something important that happened in your life." We read a story about a teenage girl who had been strongly affected by a particular event. "Something that changed you, or made you see the world differently," I reiterated. "Write about something that touched your life." A few students settled down to work. Others required individual conferences. "What happened in your life that was important to you?" I asked. "Think of something you loved or hated. An experience you remember." A few more focused on an idea and went off to write. My urgings became more specific. "How did it feel to be in love for the first time? Do you remember your first kiss? Your first breakup? A fight with your parents?" Most of the students eventually took wing. A few never did.

The following weeks were a crash course for my students in Writing Project workshops. Sense of audience, modified writing groups, responding, revision; all

were introduced and used in the course of the three weeks needed to complete the work.

At first the students were tentative about their subject matter. It wasn't interesting, or important, or good enough. Their fears were somewhat legitimate; most often, their writing was mere chronological relating of events, seemingly without purpose. I read a segment of my own autobiography to model storytelling. They were avid to hear more. After we discussed responding vs. judging, I asked for their responses. My second draft was more focused and gave them more of what they wanted to hear. They changed the direction of my piece, and watched me find a story to tell, just as they were trying to do. Fearful of my power to direct their writing, however, I gently stressed the author's power to make choices. I listened to their responses, I told them, but I was still the author and the writing was mine--the choices were mine--as their writing was theirs. They stayed at their drawing boards, sweating it out, beating their impatience and their frustration. Their stories began to take form.

Reading their work to the class was fraught with dangers. They wanted me to read their work. (Would I make it sound better? Or serve to absorb the ridicule they feared? Or did they hope their strange visual abstractions of sounds would magically tell their story in my experienced hands?) Finally, a hand raised. Ruben would take this first step. He mumbled into his paper. Peered, puzzled, lost in his own hieroglyphics. Made it through the page. The class was glassy-eyed, lost. "That was the first reading," I reminded them, "so you could hear the story. Now Ruben will read it again [I caught Ruben's dismayed stare] "so we can respond." Ruben read the story again, more familiar with his own words now, more fluently.

Responding was difficult for them, their responses often trite, often obvious. In these cases, I tried to be a bit more directive, helping the student to listen with more focus. Responding has the potential to reveal weaknesses and flaws; I understood their reticence but wouldn't give in to it. I had become a proponent

of student talk during the Project's Advanced Institute in London, and I recalled an article by William H. Teale emphasizing the important role speech plays in becoming literate. It was hard for me, harder for them, but we managed to support each other through this work. For the reader, the author, being listened to by a group of peers was an inspiring event. After the first student had read his piece, they began to grow more confident. They clamored to be heard. They were happy to rewrite, to bring the revision back to class to be heard again. I distributed xerox paper for their third revisions. The drafts were distributed; the students read, received responses, and went off to rewrite. They were revising, and each draft showed improvement, most of the time.

During this period I needed only to facilitate. When a student indicated a piece was ready for the group, everyone listened to it. Throughout my years teaching, the hardest part has been to make certain that my students were listening, that they were focused. Now they listened actively, engaged, remembering the previous draft as if coming home to the familiar. The routines, the structures which make the classroom less threatening for the learning disabled student had now widened to include listening.

As a dedicated believer in the ability of writing to impact on cognition, it was at this time that I knew I was on track. Listening and recall are cognitive acts. For so long, my students' writing had been unconnected to anything else, to be done and over with, quickly forgotten and buried. But now they were beginning to become literate in the sense that Scribner and Cole define literacy in The Psychology of Literacy: "Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use." (p.236) Writing was becoming a means to an end, to be heard, to be remembered, to be used.

We eased the dilemma about the spelling of words by instituting a cloze-type technique. Put in the initial letters, however many you know, I told them, and draw a blank. We'll go back to it later and fill in the words. I proved to them

that their work could be read, the piece understood, the missing words filled in at a later time.

I guided and waited, jumping back and forth between the various techniques. I reviewed and responded, always returning to the goal: a finished story, owned by the student, of which the student was proud.

At a point about halfway through the project, I took photographs. Large, glossy, individual pictures of each student writing, reading, responding. Ruben's photo shows him in front of the room. He is standing, gesturing, actively engaged in the reading of his work. They knew the photos would be attached to their autobiographies and displayed. They were a constant reminder: you are here, you are a part of this, you are important. You, each of you, have a story to tell.

There is still a long way to go. Although students benefitted and became involved to varying degrees, some never really found their voice during this assignment. They performed mechanically and unenthusiastically. Their writing still had no meaning for them.

Others found a light in the maze. Marion continued writing daily--political pieces, editorials, letters to editors--and revised them and eagerly brought them to class to read. Period 5 more than any other group began to value each member of the class, and themselves. Damian listened carefully, synthesizing everything, and suddenly for the first time has begun to complete homework assignments. Millie's primer level sentences disappeared in the piece about her family, heartbreaking and coherent.

The effects on the classroom as a whole linger. We have cultivated an atmosphere in which an audience is an integral aspect, where the writer is eager to share his or her work, where the others listen willingly and with enjoyment. They like each other's work. They want to hear what their classmates have written; they compliment it. Reading and writing have become social activities. I have read that literacy develops through social processes, through interactions in which the children participate and which they observe in their environment. Our experience with the

autobiographies supports this view; being part of a "literacy environment" has given my students a way to belong.

They have begun to trust themselves. They like their own work; they want others to hear it. Together they are becoming writers.

Sources

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Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe HS

Revising Reading

Why is it that many people do not re-read books they have loved? We may hear a favorite piece of music hundreds of times without tiring of it, finding, on the contrary, that each rehearing provides a richer, more deeply moving experience. But with books it is different. We say to ourselves, "There's so much I want to read. Look at all the stuff on my shelf." Because we know how much there is that we haven't read, we don't take the time to go back to what we've already finished, no matter how much we may have loved it the first time around.

I have gotten so much pleasure from the rereading I've done recently—three novels I first read many years ago. Does the pleasure for me derive from a feeling of being taken back to an earlier, more hopeful time of my life--the world open before me, a time when all of my physical and intellectual powers were at their peak?

Perhaps the pleasure is, in part, recollection of the original feeling. But there is, too, the satisfaction of seeing more than I had first seen, giving me a sense that I had embarked on a new activity.

I feel I gained a new seeing, a "re-vision" of each work. I knew the plot except for a few surprises, pieces I had

forgotten. Because I didn't have to focus on what happened, I could take pleasure in the development--watching carefully how the characters unfolded, how the scenes were set, how people and places were described. The book became for me a work of art in a way that it never was before.

And so I am led to my next question. How can I use all this in my classroom? I want to convey to my students some of the pleasure I have found in rereading, and I wonder how to do it.

I anticipate resistance. As a student I might have resisted, too. Certainly my colleagues and I spend a lot of time planning so that no one will have to read again what they've already "done"-- this despite the fact that as teachers we "do" the same things many times over, with no diminution of our pleasure in the works. But my students want to "progress" and rereading will seem to them as if they are taking no steps forward. What can I do to dispel their initial hostility?

I also wonder what we should reread. Should it be something that most of the class has read before this term? Or should rereading be used as a device for further understanding of a work we have studied together during the current semester? Possibly students could reread only specific passages--parts of the story selected, and they, as well as I, could volunteer the selections.

What kind of writing should I ask for? Pre-re-reading? (Such English!) What do you remember/feel about the work? What do you remember having trouble with? What do you remember liking/disliking? Post-re-reading? Has your feeling about the work changed? How? What differences are there between your original and current feeling? Are there things you think of/see that you didn't before? If you were the author, what would change in the work? Might you prefer a different ending? Middle? Beginning? How did you feel about the rereading itself?

And what do I hope my students will gain from this experience? I'd like them to keep finding new themes and ways of looking, new ways of seeing what they understand, new questions to ask themselves and others. I hope they'd gain what I have gained--a greater, deeper love of the work

and an appreciation of the artist's effort in creating it.

Rereading can be an important experience for anyone, but for my ESL students, a first reading is often such a struggle for understanding that subtleties of language and characterization can escape notice. Maybe I can succeed in showing them a new pleasure to be derived from the return to old, beloved friends. A bit of comfort and security can be combined with their "progress" and the rigorous demands made upon them.

Linda Farrell
M.L. King Jr. HS

Reading Interview: Wanda Brewington

At the tender age of two, Wanda ran down the aisle of the church where her mother was speaking because she, too, wanted to speak.

Some three decades later, on July 15, 1986, I interviewed Writing Project member Wanda Brewington. This day--her birthday--made the connection to the past that much more acute. That eager two-year-old was now an English teacher with a "pulpit" all her own.

In the Mount Vernon suburb of New York in the early 1950's, Wanda started life as an early and avid talker and reader. Having learned to talk before she could walk, Wanda says, "I can't remember a time when I didn't know how to read." Wanda's mom was very active in community groups and frequently gave speeches and poetry readings at meetings and parties. These oral readings were captured in Wanda's imagination, and vividly color her early childhood recollections. She can still hear the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar being read aloud, replete with his wonderful use of dialect. Her father's reading choices evade her memory; she now believes that he was a "secret reader." Both Wanda's mother and father frequently read to her.

Since "everybody had books," Wanda shared her early enthusiasm for reading with her friends. They swapped and devoured Nancy Drew episodes. Getting an Edgar Allen Poe anthology for sixth grade graduation came to represent a rite of

passage for this Westchester literary circle. The community library, too, was an excellent resource, and Wanda considers the librarian to have been an important mentor during her formative years.

Life in school, and in the honors track, was chock full of book reports and oral readings done by the teachers as well as the students. While she recalls Curious George as being a memorable childhood book she enjoyed, she also recalls a certain curious incident involving a boy named George in her fifth grade class. Poor George was not a good reader; in fact, Wanda remembers with some embarrassed adult laughter how "he just couldn't read." Apparently he had been misplaced in her honors class. She recalls the humiliation George must have experienced and her own childish giggling and that of her classmates when George was called upon to read aloud. Of course, they were all called upon to read aloud, one by one, row after alphabetical row.

Wanda spent hours reading her favorite authors, Beverly Cleary and Maureen Daly. She confesses reading about the lustful potential of the heroine in Seventeenth Summer by Daly when she was only 13 (an experience Ms. Brewington coincidentally shares with this interviewer). Pleasure reading and required reading, then, consumed much of her time in junior and senior high school. She remembers reading volumes at the suggestion of the librarian in order to get ready for Regents exams, and ultimately for college.

Not too many years went by before Wanda, college-educated, returned to teach in the high school she attended, only to witness "a complete turn-around in terms of literacy. They can't read now," she says, and blames the current method of reading "instruction"--DISTAR. She is appalled at its use, since it is a commercial reading package, not a method, and far from her own background which consisted of whole words, phonics and classroom libraries. In light of this, it is also interesting to note that the Mount Vernon school, integrated when Wanda attended it, is now segregated.

Wanda is now teaching in a Bronx high school, in a program for minority kids to help them enter the medical and science

fields. The population is mostly Black, Hispanic and Asian. What are Wanda's students reading? Are the protagonists of Nancy Drew and Beverly Cleary still alive?

If they are still alive, it seems they've had to take a back seat. Wanda, it appears, is always in hot pursuit of as much minority literature as her students can gobble up. She recently introduced a speaker into her classroom, a Jewish woman sports writer on the staff of a Hispanic newspaper. "A woman who knows about sports?" the class responded in shock. Clearly it is Wanda's mission to dispel stereotypes wherever and whenever they creep up.

How, then, does Wanda reconcile the fact that none of her beloved 1950's novel heroes and heroines were Black? It's an issue, she says, that she never really consciously thought about until this interview. "I didn't think about it back then," she says. "Nancy Drew's being white was not an issue." And since her past is not open for reconstruction, her energies are directed to the present, to the needs of her students and her six-year-old daughter, Jillian. Recently, in response to Alice Walker's recommendation that all Black children read the Moses legend rewritten by Zora Neale Hurston, she began reading the Hurston piece to her daughter. Of course, her daughter fell asleep in the middle of the selection, but that did not diminish Wanda's wonderful intentions.

And so the adult Wanda Brewington keeps on reading, with her students, to her daughter, and for herself. And that two-year-old kid running up to the pulpit for her chance to speak, to be a part of the literate world, is still on a quest, to effect changes in places where her speech is sorely needed.

Heidi Atlas
Baldwin JHS

Steal These Ideas

"It's the most useful part of the newsletter!"

"It's the part I read first!"

Now presenting, in its debut for the

1986-87 newsletter season, the ever-popular STEAL THESE IDEAS!

* * * *

You've seen those "roving photographer" pieces in the newspaper, where there is a question, and pictures of the people being quoted above the answers that they gave. Elaine Spielberg of the HS of Art and Design told us of a "roving photographer" format that she has used for her classes. First, she took pictures of all the students in her remedial Title I classes. She then posted the pictures on the class bulletin board, along with each student's name. The class brainstormed a list of questions that they wanted to hear opinions about, such as, "Is there a God?" and "How many children would you like to have?" Each week, they addressed a different question. Every Monday, Elaine handed out a 3x5 card for student responses, and the cards with the responses were posted under each student's picture. Because the answers were being "published" in a public place where students and teachers from other classes would stop by to see them, the students were very concerned with making their answers "perfect." They spent time making sure they had said what they wanted to say, and checked spelling and punctuation. Some of the students even brought in different pictures of themselves, so that their appearance, as well as their writing, would be the very best.

* * * *

Elaine also created a lesson which combines reading and writing poetry, writing letters to a poet, and an "art gallery" concept. She had students in her class write poems, revise them, and display the finished drafts in the classroom. Each poem had its own number, like works in an art gallery. She then invited another class to come in with their teacher, walk around, and read the poems. The students from that class then ordered the poem they liked best by number, and received a copy for their own. Later, they wrote letters to the author of the poem, telling what they had liked about it. Not every student had a poem selected for reprinting, but most of them did, and Elaine saw to it that a student to whom it would be particularly important to be selected got at least one request. She had also discussed

With them beforehand the idea that some of their poetry might be "too complex" to reach a wide audience. Elaine says she was struck by how respectful and sophisticated the responses were, and the student poets were quite pleased.

* * * *

Joyce Harte, teaching freshman English at Borough of Manhattan Community College, began implementing NYCWP techniques as soon as she returned to the classroom after this summer's Open Institute. During one lesson, though the students wrote responses to work they had read, they were unwilling to share them aloud. After an intense silence, Joyce asked them to write about their feelings and why they didn't want to share their work.

"The students wrote furiously for 10 minutes," Joyce remembered, and then all wanted to share what they had written about their feelings. Themes of trust and insecurity arose from students and teacher alike. "It was a breakthrough," marveled Joyce. "The activity broke the ice and established a foundation of trust."

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John LaSusa of Stevenson HS integrates reading, writing and values clarification by incorporating comic books into his English curriculum. Certain values are constant over time, John feels, such as love and hero-worship, and cartoon characters embody specific values (e.g., Superman personifies the concept of "hero" in our culture). The students read and analyze the comics to determine what the characters' lines reveal about their beliefs and values. A doctored set of comic books, with dialogue omitted, allows the students freedom to write their own stories exploring those values.

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

Do Not Take More Than 15 Minutes Per Person

Characters: JANE, a new intake specialist working with a Temporary Per Diem license

MR. REE, her supervisor
MRS. JACKSON, a new literacy student

Jane: Good morning, Mr. Ree.

Supervisor: Morning, Jane. It's 9:03. Try to make it on time next time.

Jane: Yes, sir.

Supervisor: Well, you have your work cut out for you today. Make sure the interview room is cleared by noon. I'm meeting with some people there.

Jane: Yes, sir.

Supervisor: Are you all set, know what to do? Have your forms, pencils, etc.?

Jane: Yes, sir.

Supervisor: Good. Remember, 20 people per class and finish by noon.

(Jane turns the page to the list of instructions she has written to herself from her two-hour orientation to Literacy, Intake and the Health Plan. A former fine arts major, she's now an Intake Specialist --whatever that means. She reads, "You will define the job according to the express needs of the center." A part is underlined--she takes special note.)

Jane: (She reads aloud) "Do not take more than 15 minutes per person. Remember to get social security number, date and place of birth, address, telephone number, years in school. Each person needs a test score. Remember we need 20 students per class in order to meet the state requirements." (She looks up) Twenty or the classes close, and there will go my job.

(A new literacy student, Mrs. Jackson, enters.)

Jane: Hello. I'm Jane. Welcome to the Institute.

Mrs. Jackson: My name is Joyce Jackson. I'm a mother of five children.

Jane: Before we begin the interview, Joyce, is there anything that you'd like to know--you can ask anything at all.

Mrs. J.: Well, Mrs. Jane.

Jane: No Joyce, it's Jane, just Jane.

Mrs. J.: Well, Mrs.... Jane, just Jane, I guess this is the new way, not like when I was at school. I guess you call me Joyce now, right?

Jane: Right, unless that upsets you.

Mrs. J.: Well, to be honest, Jane, this whole place upsets me--school upsets me--it upsets me to call you Jane but I'll try to learn--'cause my children say it's time for me to learn.

Jane: Are there are other questions before we begin?

Mrs. J.: Yes.

Jane: What?

Mrs. J.: Well, it sure is bothering me what is an Institute, is that a place for sick people? Am I sick, is that why I can't write or read?

Jane: Well, first, Joyce, an Institute is just a place where people come for help or to learn things. This Institute is a place for learning--learning how to read or write, do math or whatever. All the people who come here come because they want to, not because they're sick but because they're finally ready to try something different. In your case, Joyce, I guess it's because you want to learn how to write and read.

Mrs. J.: Yeah, my children tell me I'm stupid 'cause I can't write or spell or read much.

Jane: Oh! I see. So you're here because your children wanted you to come but you don't want to be here.

Mrs. J.: No, Mrs. Jane.

Jane: Um.

Mrs. J.: No, Jane. It's because I really want to read the stories like my friends read. I want to have a cookbook, my own cookbook so I could write down my recipes and cook all kinds of things.

Jane: Oh, are you interested in cooking?

Mrs. J.: Yes, Mrs. Jane, I been cook-

ing all my life. First with my mama and grandmama on the farm in Georgia. I cook for my 12 brothers and sisters, my papa, mama, the other folks that come to stay with us from time to time, 'cause they ain't got no money. I cook real good for them all.

Jane: What did you cook? (To herself) Why did I ask that? We're over time already.

Mrs. J.: All sorts of Southern fried dishes, chicken, coon-fish, vegetables, bread, everything--but my favorite was cakes and pies--my, my... could I bake cakes and pies. One time the restaurant in town asked me to work for them cookin' desserts--only desserts--imagine--only cookin' cakes, pies and cookies. It was 'cause I won the prize at the state fair four times running--my, my was I proud.

Jane: Well, what happened? (She knows she shouldn't ask.)

Mrs. J.: Mama said she need me to help out with all the children. That's why I couldn't go to school no more either--so I had to say no thank you, real polite. It was a beautiful place--but mama said NO we need you at home, we need your help here.

Jane: Oh, I'm sorry but maybe you could do some cooking here--what's...?

Mrs. J.: Now I cook every day for my five children, the church, the school, but that's not enough now. Now my children are growin' and they say mama has to read and write 'cause they're.... (Her voice trails off)

Jane: What?

Mrs. J.: They're embarrassed by me in front of their friends they said. (Mrs. Jackson breaks down and cries.)

Jane: Here's a tissue, Joyce, relax.

(Just then, Mr. Ree peers through the office window. Jane looks at her watch--21 minutes and she hasn't even gotten the information she needs for the forms. She hopes Mr. Ree isn't keeping track of her. She looks at Mrs. Jackson, feels un-easy but decides that she has to get her

moving along. She has 12 other people to interview before lunch and now she has a headache as well.)

Jane: Well, Joyce, I want you to come with me now into the next room. I have a little form for you to fill out and we're going to take a reading test--just to see how much you know--OK--don't worry and it'll be OK. Come this way. Mr. Richard will help you now.

(Mrs. Jackson remains motionless, her only movement the look of terror that crosses her face.)

Jane: (To herself) Thirty minutes. I really have to learn how to get to the important information. The information that's on the form.... Oh well.

(She looks up) Next.

Coni Buro
Board of Education
ABE/HSE/ESL

From a Teaching Journal

I never thought I would miss my student, Charlie, but I do. Charlie finally graduated last January, making a special trip to school after classes were over to say good-bye and return all the books I had lent him. I wished him the best of luck in the future.

Charlie entered my life as a real trouble-maker. Trying to be a tough leader in a class of 29 boys and 8 girls--a regular boy's club--he burned books in my closet and created riots in the room for many weeks. The principal spoke to him, and I kept trying to solve the problem of discipline in the class.

I soon noticed that Charlie was extremely intelligent. He was a reader of real literature--books like The Brothers Karamazov and Les Miserables--with perfect language skills and outstanding vocabulary. Charlie never made a single mistake on grammatical exercises or written work, an outcome of his parochial school training. He later achieved the grade of 86 on the English Regents, a very high mark in our school.

I picked up his high intelligence as soon as he entered my class in 11th

grade. I also learned that he was a child of divorce, beaten by his stepfather, a truant during 10th grade who was now trying to graduate as soon as possible. I gained this information by speaking to his guidance counselor. "Don't call his home," the counselor said. "His mother has given up on him, and you don't want to speak to his stepfather." I immediately began involving Charlie in the class. I made him my assistant and gave him special status in the room. Every day he collected and recorded the homework assignments, took attendance and did all my paperwork, tasks he completed with utmost honesty and care. He was so quick that he did all my work and his classroom assignments as well. I always made sure to praise him for work well done and for good marks in the class.

Charlie responded to my special attention by becoming an outstanding student and by talking about me as "his friend." In 12th grade he was again programmed for my class, one of off-track seniors scheduled to graduate in January. I called them my "E-8 Superstars," a designation they all seemed to enjoy.

The main point about Charlie was that he was a natural leader of boys. Everyone in his classes, the boys especially, admired him and followed his lead. In the beginning they all wrought havoc at his command, but later, when Charlie decided to show off on vocabulary, composition, play-reading, clever answers and all other classroom activities, every member of the class went along with him. Charlie's classes became vital, fun, and always filled with tremendous interest. There was total participation from everyone. It suddenly became "in" to study vocabulary at home so as to keep up with Charlie. He was a truly unusual man.

Charlie walked by my room every day for a whole semester, kicking my door open prior to 5th period. It was his greeting to me, his little masculine ritual, and I waved and smiled in return. But one day a dean caught him. He was in trouble. The dean wanted to suspend him for kicking the door.

Charlie then explained that I was his personal friend. He came to my room requesting a letter to the dean, and naturally I corroborated his story in writing,

confirming the friendship and the ritual. Charlie was never suspended.

I was really touched to learn that this tough and troubled student actually considered me to be his friend, when all I had done was try to motivate him through special attention. It takes so little, sometimes, to get good results. My approach made Charlie into a good student, which at the same time gave me the best classes I have ever had. The deal worked both ways.

One day toward the end of his last term, Charlie was absent from class. He later told me he had worked all day in the print shop creating special invitations to a beer party in Forest Park. He invited 150 students. And he also invited me. "Come to the party," he said, handing me an invitation. "You are my friend and I want you to come."

Next Monday several students asked me if it was true that Charlie had invited me to the party. "He gave me an invitation," I said. "But I was busy; I just could not attend." Charlie not only invited me, but he told all his friends about it. He really wanted me to be there.

These days I have disinterested students and scant participation of any kind. My successful motivation of Charlie now seems the high point of my career as a teacher, the only time I knew for sure that I had gotten through to at least one student. I miss "my friend" of the past; I really do. And I keep wondering: What has become of Charlie?

Else Weinstein
Franklin K. Lane HS

"I'm Not Afraid to Write Anything"

"What have I learned about writing this cycle? What have I learned about myself as a writer?" I asked my two computer writing classes to answer these questions as their final examination last June. In writing, of course. I asked that they write at least 150 words. This was the first time all cycle I had imposed a minimum or maximum word count. I thought that I would have to because the subject and audience were more like "regular school

work." I was wrong. Unbidden, many wrote two or three or four hundred words of sustained, logical prose. They hadn't started the year that way. They had begun with half sentence lists, paragraphs of three Scrooge lines.

In order to appreciate the enormity of their accomplishments, you need to know that our students are all recent emigrants to the United States, having come less than four years ago. They are all learning English as a second language. They speak over 16 different languages and come from over 26 countries. The students whose work is excerpted below had been working from the end of February until June in a computer writing class which, in essence, was a writing process class in which they had written memory chains, first person narratives, dialogue and poetry.

The reading levels in this tenth grade class ranged from third through twelfth grade. They were heterogeneously grouped in subject classes. Several of my students could not write a complete, coherent sentence in English in September. Many clutched bottles of white-out in one hand and wrote with the other. As a group, they were afraid of making mistakes. They were afraid of being embarrassed or ridiculed. Or stupid.

But in order to learn a new language, you need to be willing to be adventurous with that language. You need to be able to play with it and have fun with it and use it for your own, personal purposes. You need to embrace your mistakes as opportunities to learn. The classroom climate which allowed for risk-taking was created by a writing process approach. We wrote journals daily and I responded non-judgmentally to each entry. We worked in small groups and teams across language and ability levels all year long. We made suggestions, not judgments; we gave advice, not opinions couched as the Truth. In other words, we taught each other and we learned from each other and came to trust and depend upon each other and ourselves. Our confidence as individuals and as groups grew. The English language became the medium for discussions, group work, conferencing, collaborating and arguing.

When we worked in the computer lab, we respected each other's right to privacy,

even though the screens were there, like TVs in an appliance store window for all to view. Writing groups were fluid. People became closer to one partner than to another. It was common to see two heads, piggyback, looking at a screen with one writing partner standing over another. Or to see a writer sandwiched between two leaning neighbors as they discussed the words on the screen and the ideas behind the words not yet spoken. It became common to talk about why one wrote a line, or where one was going, or why one was changing voice, or which scene had to come next in a story. We were not only writing, but talking and writing process pieces about writing.

The excerpts which follow come from their final examinations:

When I saw the thing that I wrote, I didn't believe what I was seeing because I didn't know how it happened that I wrote so much. In this cycle I learned that, if you want to write a story no matter how difficult it is, you should try to write it.

I learned to write as a writer, the words come more easily, the sentences can be longer, the ideas come more easily than I thought. Now, it is not too difficult to write a story or anything else, because in this cycle I learned how to be a good writer. And now I'm not afraid to write anything. Lizardo (Chile)

I learned to write the experiences of my life and my childhood and to write from my imagination. I have done this very well. At the same time I learned a little more, that things I did as a child were not good. As yet, I am not a man but still a child and I know what is good and what is bad for myself. But the truth is that I still don't have enough words to say what I want. I learned to write a little more English. Also, when I am writing something about myself I feel like a writer. Ruddy (Nicaragua)

I have learned how to express myself like I never did. I used to be afraid to talk. Now I don't have to talk. I just

write it out. I have learned about myself as a writer that I could be pretty good as a writer. I may not die of hunger or I may not be another Stephen King, but I think that I could make it as a writer. If I don't, I could go for something else. I have learned something else. That people understand you better when you write it than when you talk. The thing that I hated the most was when you said time because I wanted to stay and finish my work. Chris (Puerto Rico)

When I first began, it was very difficult for me to start writing a paragraph because before I did not have any subject to write about. But now, sometimes I don't have enough space to write what I want and what I would like to tell to people. Before it was hard for me to write about a specific subject and to organize my ideas, because I was always thinking about something else. Now I know what I want to write and what I want to say. Sometimes when I have finished my work early, I begin writing and writing and writing, that is something I cannot stop doing; I have to do it constantly. Ana (Colombia)

I learned how to put together all my thoughts, like when I start writing a letter all the things that happened before all come out to my mind. And when I start writing I go very fast, especially when I am in the mood to do what I am supposed to do. I learned how to talk to the computer. I talked to the computer when I was writing my alligator story, for me it was like I heard somebody's story and I told it to somebody that was very nosy. Then this person told everybody what happened.

What I learned about myself as a writer this cycle is I didn't have any idea that I could make or write my own story by myself. Because this is my first time to write my own story. What happened when I started looking at the picture that I worked with was I could feel the revenge of Abigail on Gregory. And the other thing that I learned as a writer is to concentrate, to think something about the story I want to make or write and especially recall something that I can insert in-

side of my story. And that's what I learned as a writer this cycle.

Imer (Philippines)

Marsha S. Slater
International HS at
LaGuardia Community
College

hard work and effort you put into your job.

* * * *

I felt so good today when I hit the ball. Didn't think I could do it but I did. I feel little proud of myself for hitting the ball. When we play I can do as I did today.

* * * *

I still don't know how to bat or pitch. I could bat but I think it was the pitcher that wasn't on the side of the bat. The thing is that she wasn't here on Friday so she didn't learn how to pitch.

* * * *

I feel I still need some help in holding the bat the correct way. Maybe its because I feel uncomfortable with a wiffle ball bat. I know how to hold a softball bat. A wiffle ball bat is too light.

* * * *

I felt so good when we started hitting the wiffle ball with the bat. But I wish we had a baseball or softball field so we can have an outdoors activity. But I would feel better if we could play basketball again. Because last term I felt closer to my teams mates and the opposite team.

The only problem I had in planning the lesson was time management. It was difficult to decide how much time was necessary to complete the written task. I didn't allow enough time for discussion and sharing of the letters to take place that period. Instead, we had the discussion the following day. It went very well and when the students were put into a review drill on batting, there seemed to be a camaraderie that did not exist before.

This assignment forced me to do what I've always hesitated doing in the gym-- give the class more writing assignments. It certainly generates a better and more personal rapport in the gym.

Marcia Benhamou
Jane Addams VHS

Project Notes

The newsletter staff would like to acknowledge the work of Michael Simon, a mainstay of the newsletter since its incep-

Write-Handed Batting

Unit: Softball

Aim: To learn batting

Objective: Students will execute the proper technique of batting.

Students will relate their experience in batting.

Motivation: Today you will have a chance to describe your experience.

After an explanation of batting technique, I gave the following assignment:

Write a letter to me. In this letter, use one of the sentence starters below that reflects your feelings about today's activities:

a) I was very upset in gym today when....

b) I still don't know how....

c) I was quite embarrassed when....

d) I felt so good today when....

e) I feel I still need some help in....

f) If I were you....

The purpose of the writing was to make both teacher and student aware of the feelings, problems and successes with the new skill (batting) learned in class. I was then able to gear the next lesson to each student's individual needs.

The lesson was successful. The students enjoyed the writing exercise--rarely do they get the opportunity for written expression in the gym. Those who were too embarrassed to ask for help verbally managed to do so in writing.

Here are some of their responses:

If I were you Ms. Bee I would take a long vacation. You have been an excellent teacher in Physical Education. Like in today's activity. You made some girls who couldn't bat into another Babe Ruth. A long vacation is what you need for all the

tion. Michael has retired from the newsletter staff this year after five years of writing, editing, and selfless devotion. The NYCWP Newsletter would not have been possible without the vision of Michael and of Toby Bird, the creators and two original editors of this gazette. We wish Michael many happy hours of play time with his baby daughter and many future successful marathon runs. We will miss his energy and humor.

* * * * *

Familiar names keep appearing more and more as authors of books and journal articles related to the teaching of writing.

The October, 1986 issue of English Education features an article by Project members Betsy Rorschach and Bob Whitney entitled, "Relearning to Teach: Peer Observation as a Means of Professional Development for Teachers."

Active Voices II: A Writer's Reader, co-edited by James Moffett and Project member Phyllis Tashlik, is now available from Boynton/Cook Publishers. This book is a collection of student writing, grades 7 to 9, which follows the assignments in Moffett's popular Active Voice.

And for those of you who would like a somewhat smaller but equally prestigious audience, the NYCWP Newsletter would be happy to help you see your name in print.

See Your Name in Print

We are eager for your manuscripts--your thoughts on teaching and writing, descriptions of successful/unusual lessons, your poetry and very short prose, student writing, reports on conferences, reviews of professional literature, etc., etc. Send them to:

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Lehman College
Bronx, New York 10468

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

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of Toby Bird, the creators and two original
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