



The New York City Writing Project Newsletter

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A Note From the Editors

Writing Project presentations and workshop series often refer to the notion of the Writing Project as a model. We like to refer to ourselves as a "community of writers" and "classroom researchers." In this issue of the newsletter, Edward Osterman's "On the Road" and Melanie Hammer's "But it Doesn't Matter, This is Only a First Draft" illustrate what it's like to work within a community of teachers, and be an engaged observer in one's own classroom.

This year our New York City Writing Project has been revitalized through the ideas that participants in summer institutes and consortium courses have brought to their classes and communicated to colleagues. Teachers who have come to the Project to discover that there is more to teaching have begun to move the Project in new directions through experiments in their own classrooms.

"A Briefcase of Enthusiasm" by Joel Goldstein and the various offerings in our "Steal These Ideas" column show how ideas are being developed. This edition of the newsletter expresses how teachers have translated the theories of the Project into real activities in their classrooms. The ways in which these ideas have been adapted best exemplify the use of a philosophical construct or model as the guide for planning lessons that are meaningful for the teachers involved, their students, and also to interested colleagues.

Michael Simon
HS of Art & Design

A Portrait of Four Student Revisers

For a long time now, I've been looking at student revisions. I've been interested and troubled by the differences I've noticed among student revisers. Some really re-think a piece. For others, no matter how much talking and explaining and model-

ing I do, revision means to re-copy neatly, making some minor grammatical changes. If, as Donald Murray says, "writing is revision," what does that mean for students who can't seem to "re-see" a piece?

I began to wonder if there was a particular combination of factors that enabled some students to make sophisticated revisions, and, if so, if there was some way I could alter my classroom to encourage development of that ability.

One day in September, I was sitting in the teacher's room with the pile of first pieces of the year, rough drafts and finished drafts. I was in an angry mood, for a variety of reasons, and I deliberately pulled Jon's paper out of the pile. I had had Jon as a student the year before, and I liked his writing very much. I thought his would be a good piece to start with, a good counter for the sour day.

Jon's piece was called "Dining Out in Dallas." I looked at the finished draft and its strong opening line, "Everything about my father screams conservative except his politics and his idea of 'fine cuisine.'" Nice start, I thought. Then I scanned the rough draft. It began with "Whenever I visit my father in whatever city he's living in at the time, I become hopelessly lost in processes of eating out." The strong opening line of the final draft I found buried halfway down the first page, in a paragraph which did not appear in the final draft. I looked at the rough and final drafts more closely. The final draft had a new ending, pieces had been moved around, and other paragraphs had been deleted. The author's "voice" seemed stronger; by the final draft, he had become clearer about what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. The changes Jon had made were complex, more like the kinds of changes professional writers indicate they make than the kinds of changes students typically make (to borrow a scale used by Nancy Sommers). How had he made those decisions?

I looked through the rest of the

papers, and stopped again at Randall's. at Randall's. His was a horror story, relying on a slow, inevitable buildup of detail to create its effects. When I looked at his rough drafts, I saw he had left notes to himself, in red. Warnings such as "too much too early," "too much of a giveaway," and "silly use of words" adorned the pages of his first draft. In his final draft, he had removed parts, added others, and finished with a very powerful closing line. I read it to my Friday afternoon, 8th period class, and, when I was finished, there was a stunned, respectful silence. Then they burst into applause.

How did Jon and Randall do what they did? How did they know when they had gotten the effect they wanted? Would their approaches have anything in common with each other, or with other effective revisers? I began looking for more students to question.

Marjorie's first pieces had been polite and careful. She sat with a group of girls who were all good writers, in a technical way. They knew how to put words together and didn't make grammatical mistakes. They seemed cautious, both with what they wrote and with their responses in group. Marjorie's first story was about the day she got her contact lenses; her second, about the day she got her hamster. The revision of the hamster story, however, was told from the hamster's point of view. In the first draft, I read a straightforward narrative that could have been a journal entry; in the second, I was bouncing along inside a dark paper bag, screaming "I want my mommy."

Her next story, a departure from her usual topics, was about the murder of a homosexual by his jealous lover. Again, the first draft set down simply what happened, but the final draft was an amalgam of voices in which everyone concerned--the murdered man's mother, the neighbors, the murderer's mother, the dead man's lover--had a chance to tell their parts of the story. Periodically, the murderer would have a chance to explain how "they made me do it."

Both of these revisions represented real changes from Marjorie's original

style, and I had some questions. How had she made the change? Had something she could describe caused it? How did she go about making revisions where she kept the outline of the story but changed everything else?

From Lesly's journal, I know she is writing a novel. The second piece she handed in was 27 pages long. Looking at the original, I saw that entire scenes more than a page long had been eliminated and replaced with others. Because the only note of directions to herself that I saw read "Code: paper I", I assumed she was carrying complex decisions in her head. I thought it took courage to throw out so much that she had worked to create. I wondered where she had found the time, and the confidence.

In order to find out more about how these students revised, I made up a questionnaire for them. Their answers to the questionnaire generated more curiosity from me and, with helpful advice from NYCWP members Robin Cohen and Mickey Bolmer, I made up questions to ask them in follow-up interviews. Three of the students came after school and allowed me to tape what they had to say; the fourth, who worked, responded more fully in writing to a second questionnaire. As they talked, some of my questions were answered, and I began to get clearer pictures of them as individual writers.

Jon takes his writing very seriously. That puts pressure on him--"I either want to do a comedy or be profound, and it's hard...I throw a lot away"--but it also means he cares very much about the result. "I'll just love it to death...I'll want to kill people if they don't like it."

He has a writing group in class, but says they aren't always as honest as they could be because "here, everyone's worried that we're all going to hate each other." But when Jon goes back to New Hampshire to visit relatives and friends he has there, he brings work with him, both his artwork and his written work. He shares his writing in particular with a friend who is himself a talented writer, and who shows Jon his work.

How did he know to make the changes he made? "My group helped. They laughed there--I laughed here--and I wasn't really

sure what it was about, in the beginning." When he revises, he says he's looking for "continuity." To him, that means it has to read smoothly. "If I have to think about what I was trying to say, I change it. I know a piece is a good one when I drastically revise it and still like it."

Jon feels he has to know what he wants to say before he can write. He wants to impress his audience, and that generates a strong desire to be original, "so original, sometimes I can't think of anything. Something that I turn in, I want it to be unique, so they'll all look at it and know I did it." In that way, his attitude towards writing is similar to his attitude towards his artwork.

He likes most of what he writes and writes for pleasure. When he's around the house and bored, he'll "pick up a paper. If it's got lines, I'll write, and if not, I'll draw."

"Versatile" is the word Randall used most often to describe himself as a writer. While he has confidence in his ability as a writer, he doesn't like sharing his work, saying, "I feel my writing has too much of me in it to spread around." Some of that attitude may reflect his notion of "the ignorance of our society, and their lack of appreciation of art and the work put into it."

Randall revised his piece in 3 1/2 hours of solid work one night when he was alone in the apartment and "nothing could be heard except the scratching of my pen." When he revises, he tries to do away with predictability. His writing process is similar to the way he does his artwork in that he tries to "add detail that others may leave out because they think they're unnecessary...I like to give it dimension, to give the beholder what is beyond their perspective."

When I asked if there was "anything to add, anything else you want to say," Randall had something on his mind. He said, "writing is at its worst quality when it must be submitted by a given date. No deadline provides ample time. The author should decide when the piece is complete. Nobody ever told Michelangelo or Rembrandt that their work was due."

Listening to Marjorie's responses on

the tape was a delight. She seemed to be the least inhibited by the presence of the recorder. She said she had never thought of herself as a writer, but that she had been enjoying it and likes what she's working on. Her attitude when she approaches a first draft is loose. She says, "well, this is a first draft, it doesn't matter. Then I write anything. I still try to make it good, but I know I'm going to revise it a lot, so I don't say, well, it's got to be like this..."

The changes in Marjorie's pattern of writing seems to be paralleled by changes in her personal life. "I've always been a 'nice' person -- I'm trying to let loose this year, and become more myself." When she revises, she thinks about other people's reactions. She's friendly with the people in her group in class, and she says she might think, "Well, what Gayle going to think?" Even though she has her writing group with her, mentally, when she's working, she says it's not pressured, "it's a friendly sort of being with me." She also finds her group too polite sometimes, so "I sit down and pretend I'm somebody else. Everyone else has to be polite, but I don't have to be polite to myself." This sense of not having to be so polite seems to be part of what gives Marjorie the increasing freedom in her work.

How does she know exactly what changes she wants to make? "I don't know. I like it if it's funny--but usually I just get a feeling."

Lesly hated reading and writing until high school. Now she enjoys writing--she says journals, for example, make her feel better--and "I can't get enough of reading." What caused the change? She says, "it just happened."

Like Marjorie, Lesly says she doesn't see herself as a writer. "I just write what comes up. I'm not a talented writer." Who's talented? "James Baldwin, Stephen King. It's the way they write. It's what they put down on paper."

Lesly feels she has to know what she's going to say before she starts writing. The rough draft of her story, she said, just came out of her mind, but, working towards another draft, she struck things

that she felt weren't necessary. "I picture it in my mind, and cut out things that don't fit."

"Cut out whole pages," I said.

"Yeah, I know," she said, and smiled. "It gives me the idea to put in something better."

Listening to these students talking about writing, I was excited by their enthusiasm and by how much they were able to say about how they wrote. I was intrigued by the differences among them and drawn to the similarities, looking for a pattern that might tell me more about what to do in the classroom to encourage other students to develop their abilities the way these four had.

Certainly these four students had confidence in their abilities. Even Lesly and Marjorie, who said they didn't think of themselves as writers, had a sense of looking for something in their revision, and some faith that they could find it. Lesly "pictured it in her mind," Marjorie "just got a feeling," but Lesly knew how to move towards that picture, and Marjorie recognized that "feeling" and went along with it. Both Jon and Randall expressed confidence in their strengths as writers, in liking what they write, and in their sense that they had power to "impress" or affect the reader.

Does a group, by providing a listening audience who discusses with the author her/his work in progress, help a sophisticated student reviser? While all of these students had criticism of their groups, each indicated that at some point the group had said something helpful. For example, Jon said "they laughed at that part," Lesly said "they said it was too much of a soap opera." Although groups were a factor in the writing process of these students, along with other classroom conditions, it was not the strongest factor in determining development of writing techniques and strategies.

The writing process of skilled student revisers remains almost as much a mystery to me as it was when I started. Each of these students developed different techniques along the way, suited to their own needs. They discovered things about themselves as writers, and acted on these

discoveries. Essentially, each student finds her own way.

Melanie Hammer
HS of Art & Design

From the Project Office

At the first meeting of the Project's new Advisory Board, several members said that they and other Project members wanted more information about what was going on in the Project--what was currently happening and was being planned and talked about. We decided (with the newsletter staff) that the Project newsletter would be the best way of getting this information to members. So this is the first in a series of regular columns which will be written on a rotating basis by the directors of the Project (Sondra, Richard, and Elaine, please note!).

A lot has been happening. If you've called the office lately you know that we are answering the phone differently. We are all trying to remember to say "Literacy Institute and Writing Project." "Literacy Institute" refers to the Lehman College Institute for Literacy Studies which Richard Sterling directs. The Writing Project is now a part of the Institute. This new affiliation has not made any real difference in the way the Project operates and we don't expect that it will, but we do expect that the Institute connection will benefit us in a couple of ways.

First, we hope that the Institute designation will enable us to get further support from the College as well as outside funding.

Second, the Institute has already provided several Project members with opportunities to do new kinds of work in new settings:

1. This year the Institute has focused on work in adult literacy and has received a large grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to redesign the educational programs of community organizations serving minority female single parents. This project includes on-site consulting and workshops on literacy education for the teachers, counselors and administrators

who work in these organizations. (Marcie Wolfe is now with the Institute full-time as a director of this project. Michael Holzman, another director of the Rockefeller project, will probably be coming on board full-time in May. He is now at the University of Southern California, where he started the USC Writing Project.) In March, as part of this project, the Institute conducted training for 200 staff at the Center for Employment Training sites all over California. Four Project members served as workshop leaders: Elaine Avidon, Betsy Rorschach, Bob Whitney, and Ed Osterman.

2. In April the Institute will conduct workshops for team leaders at New York's City Volunteer Corps. Along with Richard and Marcie, Elaine Avidon and Elaine Spielberg will be leaders of those workshops.

3. Finally, in January, Elaine Avidon and I, as representatives of the Institute, evaluated a privately-funded writing project, the Cummins Engine Writing Project, in Columbus, Indiana. We spent three days in rural Indiana schools talking to teachers who had participated in the project and visiting their classes. We may be asked to return in July to evaluate their summer institute.

Back to the Project. We've gotten two new grants, and have a new Board of Education project in the works. The first grant is a \$3000 grant from the Edwin J. Gould Foundation for our High School Students Writing Project. The grant will provide stipends of \$250 to 12 students who are accepted for the Project but who need to work in July. We hope that the stipends will enable many talented students who could not otherwise afford to participate in the Project to do so.

The second grant is a Classroom-Researcher Project for New York City teachers on sabbatical. This project, which has been funded by the Matsushita Foundation, will enable us to offer training in classroom-based research and actual research experience to a small group of teachers who take study sabbaticals in spring, 1987. We'll be getting more details on this project to you soon. In the meantime, think about taking a classroom-

researcher sabbatical next spring!

We've also been meeting with the Board of Education's High School Division to plan for next year's Writing Teachers Consortium. The Board officials we've spoken with have been very supportive because the Consortium, thanks to the very hard work of Mickey Bolmer, Helen Ogden, Ed Osterman, Lillian Rossi, and Elaine Spielberg, has received excellent reviews from teachers and administrators. We're now planning to revise the Writing Teachers Consortium next year in ways that we think will strengthen it. In addition to the Project offering graduate courses at a target school, four teachers and one hundred 10th grade students at each school will be block-programmed into a Language and Learning Core. The Project's on-site consultant will work in one school only and will teach one class in the Language and Learning Core. It now looks like we'll be needing more on-site consultants (the Board has asked us to pilot the new program in 8 high schools). We'll be sending out a letter soon to our high school teacher-consultants and we'll keep all of you posted about this new project as it develops.

If you'd like more information about anything mentioned in this column or if you have suggestions for things you'd like discussed in future columns, please call me, Sondra, Richard, or Elaine at the office. Until next time...

Carla Asher
Co-Director

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:

NEWSLETTER
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A Briefcase of Enthusiasm

Periodically, I look at the back of my classroom and the \$4,000 worth of computer equipment there and hope I'm not wrong about the value of computers in writing. Currently, there is little research to substantiate the belief that computers can help students become better writers, and so it is a matter of faith for those of us who write with computers that they may be the best thing to happen to writing since the printing press. I haven't met anyone who wasn't excited by the experience of using a computer for writing, and many of us are guilty of a religious fervor in describing how we became born-again writers. I convinced my supervisors to invest in an expensive computer-writing program on the basis of evangelical enthusiasm rather than empirical evidence.

What fires my enthusiasm is in turn the reaction of students to the possibility of writing with computers. There is a genuine and widespread excitement about working on a computer that even surpasses the excitement expressed when I announce I'll be absent. This is an across-the-board enthusiasm: slower kids want to write on computers as much as brighter kids. I have a homeroom class this year, 7-8, that is very nice but very slow.

Most of the kids are reading three to four years below grade level. Many are understandably defensive about writing, and spend more time avoiding putting words on paper than in actually writing. Gesnel, for one, has such difficulty in writing that every word seems to drip like molasses from a faucet. And Nigel guards his writing as if he were putting down dirty words he doesn't want me to see. What he doesn't want me to see, of course, is how little he is putting down.

Despite sentence starters, a host of pre-writing activities, and a warm atmosphere, many of these kids greet my "Let's do some work in our journals" with the kind of response I'd expect if I suggested boys and girls work together in pairs. Yet when I set up two computers in the back of the room last October and picked four of the best kids in 7-8 to work on them, many other kids were definitely

interested in what was going on and asked to be included. When I received two additional machines last month and announced that a new group, this time eight students, would soon be selected, almost all the kids in 7-8 signed up. And in signing up they agreed that, if chosen, they would contribute \$2 each to the computer-writing program for such supplies as printer ribbons and surge protectors. Both Gesnel and Nigel were willing to pay in order to write.

Why? Maybe it's the appeal of high technology to a high-tech generation; children take to computers much more readily than adults do. Maybe there's a suggestion of familiarity from hours spent in the video arcade. Maybe, more importantly, there's a sense of empowerment from working on a computer. Here's an expensive and powerful tool that does what you tell it to do, waits patiently for you to type the next word, is never judgmental about what you've done, produces perfectly neat copy on the screen and printouts that look like pages from a book. I surveyed the first group of students about how they liked the experience of writing with computers and, while they used different language, their reasons seem similar. Here are these explanations, with frequency. Certainly the first is a surprising answer for a serious school activity:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|---|
| 1. It was fun | 8 |
| 2. Like computers | 5 |
| 3. Physically easier than pen-and-paper writing | 4 |
| 4. Liked learning to type | 3 |
| 5. Ability to edit | 3 |
| 6. Neater copy | 2 |

F. Scott Fitzgerald, in The Great Gatsby, talks about his main character's thinning briefcase of enthusiasm as Gatsby got older. Computers for writing can reverse an analogous trend among students. I now have four kids in each class each period writing on computers in the back of the room while the rest of the class works on a regular lesson, and outside of an occasional question from them on how to do something with the computer, I hardly know they're there. The level of absorption, especially from the slower kids, is amazing. And while I still can't say how

much their writing will actually improve, the fact that they're enthusiastic about writing seems very significant.

Joel Goldstein
Winthrop JHS/Dist.18

Steal These Ideas

Attempting to make up a meaningful final exam for her career guidance class, Lisa Rosenberg of James Monroe HS asked each of her students to submit one question for the test. They could use their notes and text, or not; and the only limit placed on them excluded questions requiring a yes/no answer.

The students struggled with several cognitive and writing issues: focusing on a topic, moving their thinking from the general to the specific, summarizing the term's work, being goal-oriented, phrasing clearly, saying what they wanted to say. For most students, this required at least one conference with the teacher for assistance in focusing more clearly on a specific topic or achieving clarity. Other students were also asked to give feedback about the question's validity or comprehensibility.

Though surprisingly difficult, the assignment yielded very positive results: the students were empowered by their voice in classroom procedure (it was motivationally powerful enough to inspire any of the more reticent students); it required all of them to utilize cognitive strategies and to communicate effectively; plus, it alleviated her workload.

* * * * *

In a unit on perception for a speech communications class, Gary Eiferman of Morris HS has used art and music to demonstrate how we interpret the world around us differently.

1. Exhibit 3-5 reproductions of paintings in any genre or subject matter. Ask students to free-write for 3-5 minutes about a story taking place in the painting or what they see that might be represented by the work. Students then read their responses to each work for comparisons and analysis.

2. Play 2 selections of music for 3

minutes, preferably something abstract (electronic, new music or what is sometimes called "space music"). Ask students to write about the images that come to their minds as they hear the music. (Tell them to think of the music as a soundtrack to a movie!) Then have students respond and compare their writing to demonstrate the differences in perception we have.

* * * * *

Joe Scrow of Curtis HS has his students write letters to each other on the last day of class. Because he only has 10-12 students in his class, each student is able to write a letter to every other student in the 40-minute period. As they finish each letter, the writer folds it up, puts the receiving student's name on it, and puts it in a pile. At the end of the period, students leave with all the letters addressed to them.

* * * * *

Using an idea that John Browne brought back from an AP English conference, Melanie Hammer of Art & Design has her students turn in a blank cassette with their longer written pieces. She talks her responses into the tape as she reads. It doesn't take much longer than responding in writing, and she is able to say a lot more. While reading a set of papers recently, she found herself reciting poetry, referring a student to a Faulkner story, discussing the problem of sexism in science fiction, predicting the story out loud as she read, and explaining grammar points, such as how a student might set up a dialogue so it would be easier to understand. Students take the tapes home and listen, and frequently come into school the next day wanting to talk more about what she has said. They also trade tapes, listening to what she said to their friends and members of their groups.

* * * * *

After participating in the NYC Writing Project Advanced Institute in England, Robin Cohen of Martin Luther King Jr., HS "stole an idea" and modified it for her ESL class. During the summer, participants worked in pairs on reading interviews, questioning each other on various aspects of their reading behavior. Robin asked her ESL students to work in pairs on "learning English interviews." Students generated

questions, interviewed each other, wrote first drafts, worked in revision pairs and are now working to put together a class magazine displaying the many different experiences they had learning English.

* * * * *

Steal These Ideas is an ongoing column of the New York City Writing Project Newsletter. We are looking forward to your contributions.

Gospel

When I entered my gospel singing class one Wednesday evening, L.Q. had written on the chalkboard: Gospel is 99% spirit. This was a comforting thought for most of the group. Out of twenty-six people, only a few were professional singers. The rest of us were just aspiring to have a good time, although some felt a bit nervous about joining the group. This was evident at the very first session, when a number of us were reluctant to open up and sing. We smiled, we listened, we slapped our thighs, but just barely opened our mouths. "What if my voice isn't right for this," I worried. "What if I sing a wrong note or make some other embarrassing mistake?"

But on this second evening we were assured by our instructor that singing is better than not singing, since everyone's contribution to the chorus is equally important. "Don't worry about singing a wrong note," he continued, "just try not to sing totally off-key." To my surprise, his one big complaint about us that evening was that we didn't get ugly enough! "You all try to sing too pretty--especially you ladies--like you were in an angelic choir," he teased. "Let it all out, let go, get ugly!" he shouted with pleasure.

Then L.Q. went on to explain why he had written the note on the board. "Everyone has their own spirituality and gospel appeals to that," was his basic message. It doesn't matter what your religious orientation is, you can still get into the music. And I guess that's what I liked about this course--it made me feel good about myself. It allowed me to make a connection with myself, my own innate spirituality in a non-religious

community setting. It was invigorating! Ironically, this week I found myself writing on my chalkboard:

Writing is 80% expression
20% mechanics

I pointed out to my kids that their writing is interesting and vital because it comes from them and I find them to be vastly interesting. So what if they make some mechanical errors? That's why they're in school--to learn to improve spelling, punctuation, and grammar. For some, the mechanics won't "gel" until they get into college. But to express their feelings and experiences in an interesting way is the best talent of all.

I guess the bottom line is that writing should make you feel better about yourself. You should be able to make a connection--with your own humanity.

Thank you, L.Q., for your message. I hope I can make my students feel one-half as good about writing as you have made me feel about singing.

Karen A. Millard
Sarah J. Hale HS

The Interview--Teenage Style

During the summer of '85 I participated in the New York City Writing Project Advanced Institute held at Theobalds Park College in London. Ed Osterman and Marcie Wolfe opened the institute with a "brief" activity designed to help the participants focus on our own reading history and processes. We were each assigned a partner and began an interview process leading to a portrait of one subject as a reader.

As participants delved more and more deeply into each other's histories, difficulties arose. We were assigned a partner to interview and a portrait of our subject as a reader to write. Paramount was the fear, "How can I do justice to my subject?" Other reactions included: "What will she think of me if I don't quote her exactly?" "Why am I telling him this about myself?" "Really, I think I'll have to leave before the first reading." "She'll hate me for life." "When's the next boat for the continent?"

Uppermost in our minds was the nagging question, "How dare we inflict this form of 'sadism' on our pupils?" I did. In October, as I reached into my bag of Writing Consortium tips, I came up with the thought, "How would my juniors respond to pairing off and interviewing one another?" Would they react with the same inhibitions as their teacher?

I chose two eleventh year classes for the experiment. Most of these students are models of indifference. "Can (sic) I have the pass?" is the usual response to my most brilliant pivotal question. When I proposed, "How would you like to interview one another?" I expected, at best, the usual shrug of the shoulder. Instead a chorus of, "Oh let's," greeted unbelieving ears.

"Maybe you don't understand," I ventured, "I want you to choose a partner and interview him/her as a reader."

Their only question was "Do I get a chance to be interviewed too?"

I really felt we were in business when within 15 minutes I had elicited from the class a formidable list of possible questions students might ask each other. A few impressive ones included:

"What books would you like to read if you had more time?"

"Do you ever become 'hooked' on reading?"

"Under what circumstances can you identify with a character?"

Other questions dealt with reading habits and best places to read, motivations for choosing a book, and the packaging of novels, such as the size or print and attractiveness of cover.

We spent three days interviewing after students chose a partner. As I went from group to group, I noticed partners exchanging phone numbers. "Aha," I said to myself, "they're going through the same trauma we experienced. Soon they'll be wringing their hands."

Au contraire. Their only concern was, "Don't forget to interview me, too" or "There's something else I gotta tell you."

I wondered what was going to happen when the students did the actual writing of the interview. Would I get a half page of mere catechetical dialogue? A few stu-

dents did hand in perfunctory questions and answers, but the majority of interviews were sustained pieces with thoughtful comments from the interviewer such as, "I discovered Jane is a careful reader", or, "I never knew Juan liked love stories. I thought only girls did." Others compared reading taste. "Maria likes the same kind of characters I do--people who can make decisions." And "Lynette and I like the same author. She gave me the names of some books I never read. I can't wait to go to the library."

When I asked for a process piece, "How did you feel when you were conducting your interview," I expected some negative responses. Would my students reveal their insecurities? Would I find they too worried about not doing justice to their subject?

Not a chance! Every process piece waxed enthusiastic. "I loved it! I only wish I could be interviewed some more." Or, "I'd like to find out more about Susie. Can we do this again?"

The fruits of the project were manifold. Students who seldom wrote produced sustained interviews with editorial comments, and nobody said, "This is boring."

Thank you Marcie and Ed! Thank you Writing Consortium!

Rosemary Gelshenen
Norman Thomas HS

Tell Me a Story

Writing Project meeting: 1/11/86

He cuts an unusual figure: thin, stooped, almost drawn into himself. Yet, as he begins, it becomes apparent that Peter Elbow speaks with his body as eloquently as with his words. His feet shuffle back and forth tentatively as he gropes with ideas. He begins his presentation requesting that the audience concentrate on their own listening process.

(I came to this "hearing" a little worried that I might have heard it before and that I wouldn't want to hear it again. "Telling Stories of Reading and Writing"--I was at NCTE and then a week ago in class, the day we got back

from vacation, I was trying to help answer questions about narrative in Ethan Frome. The question was "who is telling...?"

How do we hear stories? How do we read? Process is the story of how we get there, telling our own story.

(There is a tradition for this in literature--How I Got This Story--the narrator in Ethan Frome, the "Custom House" in The Scarlet Letter. Is this also true in The Catcher in the Rye? What about Wuthering Heights? The French Lieutenant's Woman?)

Telling stories about reading and writing is useful and difficult. It is useful because one finds out what happens in readers' minds. It is difficult because watching oneself is an arduous process.

(Authors tell us of how they heard a story, how a story came to them, but with Wharton, say, or Hawthorne, this information is a matter of the story's arrival, how it physically came to them. Once the reader has been made aware that the narrator is acting as conduit, do authors stop telling the story of how they heard the story? Or, is the entire narrative that follows really a story of process, a story of reading and writing?)

Peter presents his own process of workshop talking and the story of his struggles between order and disorder, between the prescriptive and descriptive.

(Whenever narrators step out and address the audience as "gentle reader," can this be interpreted as writers' awareness of process, that they are telling the story of a story as well as telling the story itself? It seems to me that with the development of narrative, authors have tried very hard to hide the seams of process. The convention of addressing one's audience is not used much these days. Narrators don't readily make themselves known; they don't "intrude" as they once did.)

(I'm lost and trying to find something to hook into; I've gone off on my own tangent. Now, write down a phrase that makes sense of what Peter is saying and use that as an orienta-

tion to get back into the presentation.)

Why is it useful to tell stories of reading and writing? Telling stories makes people feel less alone, less stuck. It is valuable feedback because it doesn't ask for advice or evaluation; the reader doesn't have to be skilled because the reaction is personal, idiosyncratic. When the reader gives advice or evaluation he/she is often wrong.

During the second half of his presentation, Peter led us in an exercise of responding to student writing. He proposed the view that familiarity with many options will enable us to comment more quickly and thoughtfully, that we won't then slip into only one style of commenting.

Across the methods, one message remained consistent: we must respond as fellow humans, telling the story of what happened to us when reading a piece of writing. Our power comes from telling the truth. Peter emphasized the importance of truth in responding if our responses were to have validity for our students: "Frankly acknowledged subjective reactions are at least true--even if true only for one reader. Though this sounds straightforward, we had a lot of difficulty in attempting to describe the student's text; many judged it without acknowledging the judgment. ("You introduce your character very early in the story," for example, rather than "You introduce your character in the first paragraph.")

(It's so much more difficult than it sounds. We're back in the field of metacognition. I have to know myself before I can respond truthfully; I have to be aware of what I want to accomplish, of what I am saying, of what I am not saying. I thought I was doing just that, yet...judging by the responses of others, it's difficult for many of us. We have to step out of the role of teacher responding to a learner, and become readers responding to a writer. We have to ignore preconceived notions of what is right, what is best, that we are the authority. We have to give of ourselves.)

This doesn't mean we can't give ad-

vice. It does mean that our advice has to be rooted in the student's writing rather than in a generalized notion of what is better. "I would change this by..." rather than "You should..." provides one alternative. It does not make a pedagogical verdict which can be challenged.

Peter recommends reading a piece through before responding to strengthen our comments. We will be able to choose the appropriate mode from a field of potential responses.

(Listening to everyone's different responses was an awakening. There is a good case for consensus grading, but it just isn't realistic. My own experience has taught me that just responding personally, though it may be great as a communications technique, rarely leads to improved writing. The prescriptive needs to come in--albeit a truthful prescriptive, acknowledging its subjectivity.)

A facility with various modes of responding empowers us to become more effective, as long as we remain truthful.

April Krassner
New Rochelle HS
Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe HS

Project Notes

Several NYCWP members should be recognized for their recent accomplishments...

Toby Bird finally and happily received her Ph.D. from CUNY after successfully defending her thesis, "Dickens and the Tradition of Comedy."

Phyllis Tashlik Katz and Lynn Kearney had their article, "Collaboration and Conflict: Teachers and Researchers Learning," published in Language Arts (Nov. 1985).

Through Teachers' Eyes--Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work, by Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson (Heinemann Educational Books) will be published in mid-April. This long-awaited book is the culmination of lengthy research in the schools in Shoreham-Wading River, Long Island, and gives working portraits of six teachers in their classrooms. We look forward to read-

ing this ethnographic opus which chronicles classroom teaching and the process of teachers teaching each other.

Ed Osterman's article, "On Teaching," which appeared in our last issue, really rocked them in Boston. It was republished, to great acclaim, in The Boston Union Teacher.

Betsy Rorschach co-authored The Right Handbook, an innovative work designed to introduce students both to the conventions of writing and to the importance of making choices in writing. It should be a good read.

This past February, the oldest established permanent floating writing group in New York celebrated its third anniversary. Robin Cohen, Melanie Hammer, Jerry Megna and Michael Simon rejoiced and kept reading each other's work.

Michael Simon
HS of Art & Design

On the Road

One of the aspects of teaching that has always disturbed me is the difficulty of moving into other areas of education aside from administration. If one wants a break from the routine of five classes a day or wants to develop new professional skills, what can one do? Many teachers move into administration. However, if you have no interest in supervision, the public school system offers few opportunities. There are very few, if any, jobs for teachers who want to do research, develop curriculum, train teachers, or who just need a year or two of something new to recharge their batteries and avoid "burn-out." Last year an answer arrived for me in the form of a unique consulting job. As a result of five years of in-service work that I'd done for the New York City Writing Project, I was asked to serve as a full-time teacher-consultant for the Writing Teachers Consortium, a special program of the New York City Writing Project.

This job has taken me out of my high school and my own classroom for the first time in eleven years. In addition to over-

seeing three graduate courses in the teaching of writing, I am expected to help twenty subject area teachers (all of whom are attending these after-school courses) in each of three different schools to use more writing with their students. Though I'd come to this job with considerable prior experience and knowledge, I had no idea what feelings I'd experience as a travelling consultant. Now, in my second year of this unique job, I am trying to examine what it's been like for me.

At first, I felt awkward about accepting this position. I recalled the contempt with which my colleagues and I regarded the reading specialist who would descend upon us one day a month, dispense advice, check clerical work, and then retreat into the labyrinth of the Board until required to make another appearance a month later. We didn't regard her as a real teacher; we didn't even feel she deserved the same salary we earned. Leaving the classroom in my mind has always been synonymous with joining the enemy, committing an act of betrayal. Still, I must admit to having had a sneaky envy of those roving consultants who, at least, had the opportunity to do something different. And distressed by the chaos in my own school and anxious to strengthen the consultant skills I had already been developing after school for several years, I applied for the job.

Last year, my first year on this job, I felt guilty about the fact that I did not seem to be as overwhelmed with take-home work as I was when I was teaching five classes of English a day. I suddenly had some time on weekends for myself; I actually had some free weeknights. While I cherished this personal freedom, I questioned it. Was I doing my job? Was I working to full capacity? If so, I kept asking myself, why was I not physically drained? Why was I not riddled with tension or on the verge of emotional burn-out? As the year progressed, I began to discover that this new position required of me a different set of expectations. Still it disturbed me to realize that I had come to equate teaching with physical and emotional exhaustion.

As I became more acquainted with the demands of consulting, new routines and

responsibilities began to make themselves evident. True, I was not trekking home to hours of composition responding, journal reading and lesson planning. Instead, I began spending several hours a night on the telephone, talking to various Writing Project members who were teaching the graduate courses I was overseeing (one of which I was co-teaching). These calls involved lesson planning, evaluating the previous session, discussing problems these teachers were having with course participants, and arranging appointments for outside presenters to come to each course. On weekends, lesson planning time was replaced by Writing Project staff meetings at which material was developed and activities for courses designed.

I now spend four days a week in three high schools, and I have few free periods on those days. My time is divided between teaching demonstration lessons (in all subject areas), helping participating teachers prepare or consider different kinds of writing activities for their classrooms, and, most often, consulting with these teachers to help them implement new writing techniques in their courses. Because I have no office or classroom in these schools, I spend my day running around each building in order to work with teachers. It is important to me to make the classroom teacher's day as easy as possible. Therefore, I try to meet with teachers on their turf at their most convenient time. So, we tend to meet wherever and whenever we can: in the library during a free period, on hall patrol, on duty in the student cafeteria, on watch outside the girl's bathroom, in the teacher's lounge. Since none of the schools have provided me with a place to store materials, I trudge around each building carrying folders of materials to show teachers when we consider possible projects and lessons.

As I move around from teacher to teacher and school to school, I feel isolated. I'd been teaching in the same school for eleven years. In that time, I'd come to know almost everyone in the building and regarded my colleagues as a second family. To leave the warmth and security of that womb for a job that finds

me going back and forth among three schools has left me feeling like a nomad, shuttling around the Bronx without a place to call home. Oddly enough, the worst part of my day has become lunch. I enter the teacher's cafeteria searching desperately for someone to eat with rather than having to sit alone. The awkwardness of it makes me recall the horrendous year of per diem subbing I did over a decade ago. I would go up to the teacher's cafeteria and sit at a table of teachers, only to be ignored or unacknowledged. As a consultant, I frequently encountered the same experience last year. There I sat at a long table of special education teachers, one of whom was the chairperson who had just spoken with me about doing a departmental workshop for her. Still, I was neither included or introduced. Now that I am a teacher-consultant, I have become a pariah, an untouchable of sorts. And I must face certain facts. I am not a member of a department. I no longer belong to a faculty. During the day, I have no one to gossip with or complain to. I have no one with whom I've shared a work history and no one to whom I can blow off steam. Being a consultant has meant giving up the sharing and camaraderie of the group, and I find the isolation devastating.

Something else I've come to realize is that now that my day revolves around teachers and their needs, I miss the students more than I'd ever imagined. I miss the students shouting, "Hey, Mr. O!" in the hallway. I miss Lillian asking me for help with her Macbeth essay. I miss talking with Jose about the Yankees before the first period class begins. I don't miss behavior problems, but I now realize how important my ongoing relationships with students were to my satisfaction with being a teacher. When I do get the opportunity to teach someone else's class now, it seems like a gift, a privilege. I feel I'm home again.

Nevertheless, there are rewards to a job like this. I make my own daily schedule and it varies from day to day. I have met many different kinds of teachers and have seen many different kinds of high schools, thus giving me a broader view of how the system operates. If I need to

attend a conference, I can leave the building during the day and not have to explain my disappearance to a supervisor. In fact, as a consultant, I've noticed a definite change in my relationship to administrators. I am working as conscientiously as I ever did in the classroom. However, because my job title is different, the powers-that-be regard me differently. Now I am treated as a professional who knows something, not a child who needs to be monitored and disciplined. I am grateful for this but it leads me to a disturbing conclusion: the further away one gets from the classroom, the more one is respected.

Perhaps the nicest aspect of my job is helping teachers to experiment and watching them change. How satisfying it is to have a history teacher tell you he's overjoyed with the results of a point of view writing assignment you helped him design! How good it feels when a special education teacher expresses surprise and delight with the writing her students did or an art teacher thrusts a pack of process journals in my hand exclaiming, "I can't believe it! You were right! They did write some important things. Now, what do I do?" I get immense satisfaction watching a teacher pull off a lesson I know would never have been attempted had I not been there to guide him or her and to give encouragement. I know I've helped teachers try new techniques and learn new things about writing. But I've gotten something in return as well. I've learned about history, biology, nursing, and business education from working with teachers in different subject areas. I've learned about the problems and procedures that teaching these different disciplines require, and it has been challenging to find ways in which writing can help these teachers help their students.

I am not sure where I will be next year: back in the classroom or still "on the road." Ideally, I'd love to do a little of both. But that kind of job does not exist in the New York City school system. So, while I am grateful for having had the opportunity to grow in new ways, I now find myself in a kind of professional limbo. I know I miss the classroom too

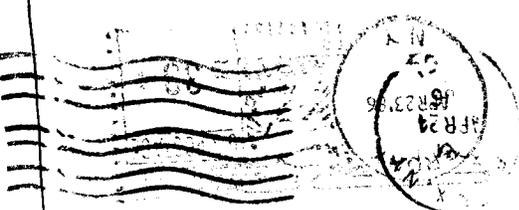
much to desire a full-time consultant job from hereon. On the other hand, after two years of this, I wonder if I can still deal with the rigors of five classes and a homeroom. More important, now that I have worked in a position that provides greater freedom, do I still want to return to five classes a day? I now understand why so few teachers return to a full teaching load once they have abandoned it. I understand it and still abhor it. Teachers should teach. It is the classroom teacher who deserves our greatest respect. I still believe that. So, where do I go from here? Is there a place for someone who wants to teach but also wants to consult

or develop curriculum or train teachers?
What happens to people like me?

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