



## A Note from the Editors

Welcome to the NYCWP Newsletter's last issue of the 1986-87 year. Recently, the newsletter has become more of an integral part of the Project as a means for continuing dialogues begun during our monthly meetings. In our current issue, we have three responses to the concerns raised by Paul Allison and Chris Kissack in our last issue. Eill Delaney, Lois Weiner and Nancy Wilson voice their opinions about who we are as a Project and what our role should be in effecting change. The forum at the May meeting generated material from many other members, and we expect this discussion to continue in the fall.

Further variations on these themes include pieces by Ed Osterman on struggling with the 40-minute period, Joan O'Connor on the development of her adult literacy students, and Barbara Batten on how her elementary-school students, in response to the incident at Howard Beach, became engaged in more issue-oriented writing.

On the curriculum front, Laurie Wallner examines point-of-view writing under varying conditions in her science classes, and Barbara Curran experiments with process journals in her art classes.

Maxene Kupperman-Guinals contributes to the lighter side with her article, "How the Writing Project Changed my Life," and Sydney Langosch describes the changes in writing and teaching produced by participation in the WTC. Lisa Rosenberg traces her own writing process in poetry, exploring the mix of inspiration and perspiration needed by all of us in order to write.

We'd like to heartily thank our growing number of contributors. This has been the best year yet for newsletter submissions and we look forward to publishing an ever-broadening spectrum of writing from our members. Keep those cards and letters coming!

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Eileen Cropper, Institute/NYCWP secretary, without whose able assistance the newsletter would not be possible.

We hope you all have a [choose one]:

- a) carefree
- b) contemplative
- c) permanent
- d) revitalizing summer. See you next fall.

## A Study of Point of View Writing Under Various Conditions

Many times while I was taking the Writing Consortium workshop I would draw a blank and not know what to write about. In the beginning, I felt very insecure about my writing. It was an uncomfortable experience for me. As I struggled with my own writing, I started to become aware of how my students might feel when they were given writing assignments in class. I realized that writing must be even more difficult for them.

I wondered how my students might feel when given a writing assignment under different conditions. Would it be more difficult to write if they knew their work would be graded? How did they feel about reading their work in front of the class? Would the students write better if they knew their papers were not being graded? I decided to explore these questions for my curriculum project.

### The Lesson

We had just completed studying light waves and sound waves in physical science when I decided to give my students a writing assignment. The purpose was to find out what they had understood about light and sound and to encourage students to incorporate acquired science facts into a written piece. The students were given a choice of topics. The following were written on the board as students entered the classroom.

Pretend that you are a light wave:

1. Write an adventure story about what happens when you go through an eye.
2. Write about an argument between you and a sound wave in which you explain to "Mr. Sound Wave" why you are better than he.
3. Write a story between you (the light wave) and all the electromagnetic waves in which each electromagnetic wave tries to prove he is the most important.

4. Write an adventure story about what happens when "Mr. Light Wave meets the Lens."

Although all four classes had to choose from these topics, the classes were placed under different writing conditions:

Class #1--Free writing. Students were told to use their imaginations. I told them that I was looking for interesting pieces, "science fiction" material, juicy stuff. I explained that their papers would not be graded. They did not have to read their papers aloud, but if they wanted to, they could share their papers with their neighbors.

Class #2--Pressure of a grade. Students were told that their papers were going to be graded and would have an effect on their final report card grades. Spelling and grammar mistakes would be corrected on their papers. During the class, the students were reminded of the importance of the grade.

Class #3--Peer pressure. Students were told that their papers would not be graded, but they would be required to read them in front of the class. I told the students that as they read their papers, their classmates would be able to criticize and comment on their work.

Class #4--Teamwork. Students were told to pick a partner and write their papers in teams. The papers would be collected and checked, but would not be graded.

#### Observations

Through this assignment, I learned a great deal from my students. I seemed to get the best results from my first class (free writing). When the assignment was introduced, some students seemed to be a bit confused. "If it is not going to be graded, why do we have to do this?" was the common question. However, after they accepted these conditions they seemed to really enjoy doing the assignment. Many students shared their writing pieces with others. The most creative pieces came from this class.

Students in my second class (pressure of a grade) were more intense in their writing. In the first class, some students talked and shared ideas while they worked. Students from my second class worked quietly and took

the assignment very seriously. As I walked around the room, students asked me for the correct spelling of words. Two students did not do any writing. I asked them why. "I have nothing to write--I don't know what to write about," was their response.

Students in the third class (peer pressure) were very upset that they had to read their papers in front of the class. The students did not seem to enjoy it. In fact, two students asked to be excused from the assignment. Three other students kept complaining that they needed to use the bathroom pass. Unlike the other three classes, students in this class finished their papers early. Also, the papers seemed to be more factual and less imaginative than the other classes.

The students in the fourth class (teamwork) enjoyed working with partners. The groups seemed to work very well together. However, I was surprised to find that the quality of their work was poor. This could be due to the fact that this was the first time that they ever worked in pairs when writing a paper.

#### Conclusions

Since papers from my first class appeared to be the most productive, in the future I will assign more writing that will not be graded. Once students become comfortable with the idea, writing without the pressure of a grade could be very helpful in facilitating learning. Students in all the classes enjoyed reading their papers to friends or to the person next to them. Although I have not tried it yet, I will start having my students share their papers with the person next to them, eventually working up to group editing. Students felt very comfortable with the idea of grading; however, peer pressure definitely had an effect on the students' writing. In the future, I plan to use grouping, but will not insist that students stand in front of the room to read their papers.

I enjoyed doing this project and I hope to continue to incorporate new and innovative writing activities in my classroom.

Laurie Wallner  
Franklin K. Lane HS

## Process Writing in the Art Class: Quotation Posters

The concept of the composing process is common to both writing and art. I have been utilizing many Writing Project ideas in my art classes, including: 1. What does art mean to you? Tell about your previous art experiences. 2. (After drawing an Ice Age horse) Pretend you are an Ice Age cave artist. Give some reasons why you made your giant cave paintings. 3. (After a slide show on African textiles) Pretend an African student visited our school. Describe his/her clothing. 4. (After a slide show on Roman art) You just woke up in ancient Rome. Write a letter describing what you see and feel. 5. Select an art work displayed in the classroom. Explain how the artist created an illusion of space in that picture.

I introduce each assignment with the disclaimer, "Don't worry about spelling or grammar. Just let your ideas flow. This will be graded only on whether or not you have done it." Later I read each student's writing holistically. I resist the temptation to correct spelling or grammar and simply write my impressions of the piece on the student's paper, trying to be as positive and reinforcing as possible so that their next assignment can flow easily without their worrying about negative comments. I also make a note in my marking book of completed assignments. I have not asked students to revise their writing, but I have read (with student approval) selected papers to the class or asked students to read their own writing aloud. Also, when I return their papers, I can see that students are very interested in what I have written and often share my comments with their neighbors.

In one writing assignment, the students were asked to write about the concepts, planning and production of a poster based upon a well-known quotation of their choosing, an art assignment which they had completed a week before. I began by asking them to recall some of the concepts we discussed in preparation for making the quotation, pointing out some of the completed posters displayed in the art room. I listed some of

these concepts on the board--the definition and sources of quotations, typical graphic layouts (centered, flush left and ragged right, flush left and right, etc.), thumbnail sketches, lettering styles, illustrations drawn by students or cut from magazines to enhance the meaning of the quotation, and art materials we used. I then asked them to look back on how and why they selected their particular quotation (I had typed some up, brought in Bartlett's and Hoyt's quotation collections and elicited several from the class itself), how they planned the layout, why they chose the illustration they used, how they created the finished work or how they intended to complete it, and their assessment of their completed work.

A few students complained, as they inevitably do, "This is an art class. Why do we have to write?" I replied, "Writing is just another art form where you express ideas in words rather than in pictures." This seemed to assuage them. I handed out composition paper (I think they tend to be freer writers using free, unlimited paper). I asked them to write about any or all aspects of the quotation project. They could limit themselves to the meaning of their quotation or add as many other aspects as they wished.

Again, I gave them my standard disclaimer not to be "hung up" on spelling and grammar. Even though I had already said they didn't have to write about everything we discussed, several students asked if they had to answer all the questions I had suggested. Again, I reminded them that they could write about one or as many of these as they wished. Those students who had written well on previous writing assignments I had given them were already writing away, while those who tended to produce less in earlier attempts continued to stare ahead and were slow to begin. I kept encouraging them, "Just talk about what the quotation means to you or why you picked it. Write whatever comes to your mind."

After 15 minutes, when most seemed to have exhausted the topic, I collected the papers and said we'd read them the next day, since we had to finish the previous day's drawing assignment.

Later, as I read the results, I found that students who usually wrote well on other assignments did well on this piece, while those who usually wrote little did so here. These latter are the students I would like to concentrate upon--how can they be encouraged to express more of their ideas on paper? I wondered if those students whose art work is more successful also produce writing that is more "successful?" Is there a correlation between visual and writing skills? This is a question for further observation.

I was pleased with the more consistently good writers' pieces. I could see that many students chose quotations for very intimate or thoughtful reasons. It was also apparent that many of the concepts of graphic art (layout, a visual illustration to enhance the quotation's verbal meaning) stayed in their minds:

The reason why I picked my quotation "You are never too old to learn" is because I have respected to the people that try their very best to finish there education so they would be able to start a new life with there new gift.

In the drawing I put block lettering to show straight and endurance because that is what you need when you go back for an education.

The way I see it I choose to draw it free to put a little comadie in by drawing a mummy going to school. (Eddie C.)

Although this was not the most successful writing piece I have done with the art class, I intend to do another process piece after we draw an antique telephone. Part of the problem this time was that I had students write the process piece nearly a week after the quotation poster was due (not all students had completed it on time). We had already begun a new unit on the illusion of form, so perhaps I allowed too much time and new material to come between the production of the poster and the verbal description of it. Perhaps, with more immediacy, the less verbal students would have fared better. In the future, I will consider the passage of time after a project when doing this sort of writing.

Barbara Curran  
Alfred E. Smith HS

## Steal These Ideas

Since his tenth grade students had "had it" with personal journals, Ed Osterman, teacher-consultant at Newtown HS for the Writing Teachers Consortium, decided to try a class journal, an idea suggested by one of his students. He organized it as follows. At the start of each day, Ed asked which of the students wanted to hold onto it and write in it that day. The rules were that it could not be written in during class, and could not leave the school. Sometimes one student held onto it all day and brought it back to Ed after the last period; other times one student passed it along to others before it was returned to Ed's classroom.

Although another class at Newtown, also experimenting with a class journal (at Ed's suggestion), focused theirs on specific themes, Ed's class voted to make theirs more open-ended, a decision which he feels has made the experiment "more productive and less confining." By the end of the term, the class journal was filled with personal pieces, news articles, issues and questions raised by the students or by Ed. Everyone in the class (including Ed) wrote in it, commenting on writing done by others in the class, or starting a new piece. Although he is unsure of how to give closure to this project, Ed sees its potential both for uniting a class and for raising issues of importance for discussion and further writing.

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Since they were scheduled for concentrated work in Curtis HS's computer lab, Barbara Martz's writing class decided to produce individual magazines as their term projects. After some short exercises to learn the mechanics of the computers and the word processing system, students wrote "many, many first drafts." Later, they taught Barbara some computer-based revision and editing tricks, including the use of the "replace" function to change "she" or "he" to "I," thus changing point of view. Her students wrote their own introductions and then used the Print Shop program to make covers. In addition to creating their own

personal magazines of their writing, Barbara's students are also contributing pieces to a class magazine.

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Lisa Rosenberg of James Monroe HS used reading logs with her tenth grade special education students. She read the book, A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich, aloud in class (unless, as frequently happened, a student asked to be allowed to read and was sent home with the book to prepare the next day's reading and discussion). Log activities included "do now" sentence starters designed to review the previous day's chapter and/or foster predictive thinking, and "summary" writings such as, "What questions do you still have?" or "What questions would you like to ask Character X?" The sharing of log writings demonstrated to students that they shared similar concerns, and were struggling with similar perplexities. One student wrote, "This is the best book I have ever read. In fact I'm sad to say this is the only book I've ever read." Students in the class still refer to the characters and issues raised during that month, and discovered that the logs helped them to form and recall their ideas.

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## THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

### Introduction

In this section, we would like to continue the dialogue begun at the February meeting, and continued in print in our last issue, about beliefs and directions for the Writing Project. The following three articles are responses to the pieces written by Paul Allison and Chris Kissack. Publishing these articles in no way ends this dialogue. We invite further reflections on these and other issues.

Dear Chris

As usual, I agree with much (even most) of what you say, and as usual I admire you for saying it. But (again as usual) I have

a sharp disagreement with part of your message--in this case not where you want to go but how you want to get there. It's Issue #1, in particular, that bothers me.

Of course I agree that "our goal should be to help students become critical, thinking people who can evaluate their situations, plan a course of action, and make real changes in their lives." But I don't agree that in order to work towards that goal we should necessarily encourage our students to "go beyond" personal narrative.

I am all in favor of students keeping reading logs, math logs, journals of all kinds. Like you, I see writing as "a tool for thinking and learning." And I hope my students--all our students--will write essays, letters, editorials and petitions as well as logs; that they will have voices in the world. I am in favor, too, of students--of all of us--thinking critically about what they see around them. But I don't see personal writing as unrelated to those goals. There is an implied "merely" (as in "merely personal") in your discussion that I cannot agree to.

I am a great believer in the power of stories. I am one of those people who learns best through stories: through reading them, hearing them, telling them. I think there are others like me--perhaps many in any class. I think sometimes that it is mainly through the stories we tell, of our own lives and other people's, that we learn to understand the world--and then, perhaps, to change it.

I know there's no guarantee that it will work that way. Perhaps for some people personal writing will always be primarily "emotionally satisfying" (though that in itself, to my way of thinking, is nothing to dismiss), but for others it will lead to precisely those "connections to others" you hope to see. For one story leads to another, your story to mine, our stories to the stories of others we know or perhaps have only read or heard about. And from these stories, taken together, come reflections: this is what it means to be a teenager, to be a woman, to be a member of an oppressed minority.

There is no guarantee, as I've said, that reflecting on personal experience will

lead to change, either personal or political. But I believe that sometimes--perhaps often--it will, and in any case I can't see change taking place without it.

So by all means let us encourage our students to write in many modes and for many reasons. But let's not leave personal narrative behind. Let's take it with us, instead, into the worlds we want to study. We need it.

Nancy Wilson  
Lehman College

## Why We Need a Statement of Beliefs

If I thought--for a second--that the philosophy of the Writing Project was that "classroom changes follow personal growth" (as Paul Allison says), I'd drop the Project like a hot potato and try to find a professional organization that understood and opposed the immense roadblocks which the Board of Education places between the individual teacher and professional development.

Fortunately, in its dealings with teachers, administrators and the Board of Education, the Project acts on the understanding that teachers need structural changes in the schools to facilitate their personal growth. The Project doesn't ask teachers to attend or give workshops as volunteers. Why? Part of our ideology (and yes, we have an ideology, even if it's not explicit) is that we need conditions different from those with which we are ordinarily provided in order to grow professionally. The Project functions on the premise that material changes, like additional pay for after-school workshops or the paid presence of a Writing Project site coordinator, are the prerequisites for beginning to change the ways people teach writing.

The issue then is not whether the Project has an ideology, but what it is and what we want it to be. Paul believes, for instance, that the Project is committed to process over product. His (ideological) commitment to process is probably shared by most Project members, so if we sat down to write out a statement of purpose for the Project, that premise would be included. There is certainly a danger of calcification in

any organization, but the act of writing a statement of purpose needn't necessarily hasten or hinder the Project's becoming rigid. In fact, the process of hashing out a statement of purpose might well reinvigorate the Project by drawing heretofore inactive members into the discussion of its objectives.

What should the Project's goals be? I think Christine Kissack's suggestions provide a solid framework for the discussion, and I'd like to divide them into three categories.

First, should we help our students to grow as writers beyond the personal writing we teach so well, and, if so, how can we do it?

Second, how can teachers of writing help students understand and try to overcome forces, personal and societal, such as racism and sexism, which sabotage achievement?

Third, how can Project members alter those horrifying social and educational conditions which breed failure?

The first question, how to segue from the first person to the third in writing, is a pedagogical one I believe we need to explore, along with Project members throughout the country. Also, I share Christine's indignation that what we do in our classrooms so rarely connects to our students' lives and that we need to find ways to help students and teachers experience the power writing has--and hasn't--to alter ourselves and society. If we don't acknowledge the destructive social forces which undermine our students' chances of success in school and out of it, we limit our effectiveness in reaching them and fuel our own and our students' despair.

I'd love to see the Project explore ways of teaching writing that challenge the division between school and life outside of its four walls, and I think that we in the New York City Project have a particular opportunity and responsibility in this regard, since our students are victimized by the gulf between their lives and their schooling more than students in suburban and rural communities are.

How to teach writing to help students understand and cope with a brutal environ-

ment is an important matter I'd like to see the Project examine. That's a different job from tackling the social problems themselves. We already belong to an organization that's supposed to be doing that--our union--even though, in my opinion, it's shamefully derelict in its responsibilities. The Project shouldn't try to become what our union should be, an advocate of progressive social change. Changing the union seems so impossible that it's alluring to give an open, healthy teachers group, like the Writing Project, the enormous and enormously important job the union has shirked. But the Project isn't the union and shouldn't try to be, which is not to say that Project members shouldn't try to make the union more responsive.

The Writing Project already has a special responsibility. In a sense, we are the union's conscience. Just as NCTE tries to educate the teachers' unions, the public, and politicians about what English teachers need in order to be effective, we should press the Regents, State Education Department, Board of Education, the UFT, and the New York City electorate for what we know teachers of writing in the city need to reach students: smaller and fewer classes, less bureaucratic intrusion, better resources and materials, and so on.

The Project and some Project members already do this kind of lobbying on an informal basis. If we had a statement of purpose for our goals, our lobbying would be more effective because the members who attend hearings or conferences or deal with the media would be representing the expressed opinions of the Project itself.

Although I wouldn't want to see the NYCWP become a political organization which spends its energies organizing demonstrations, I think we have an indirect political effect. The Project assists teachers, and through them, students, to find their voices, which later, we hope, they will raise in protest, in a political vehicle of their own choice. By encouraging teachers to focus on the process of writing rather than its product, we reinforce their courage to trust their own perceptions, and, in so doing, sometimes to reject powerful tradi-

tion, blandishments of textbook publishers and threats of supervisors, bureaucrats and politicians. In this way, the Project helps dispel the demoralization and cynicism which poison teachers morally, intellectually and politically and hinder us from defending our own and our students' well being.

Lois Weiner  
HS for the Humanities

## Limitations...Doors...and Reform

I went to the Writing Project meeting at Lehman on Saturday, April 25. We were discussing teaching. After a while, we were asked to come up with a word that reflected the discussion of the group. The word our group picked was "limitations." We talked about the limitations an imposed curriculum places on teachers, the limitations of the factory-model eight-period-daily schedule, the way chaotic behavior limits our classroom teaching, the limitations placed on us by the top-down decision making process in our school, the limitations we have placed on ourselves by accepting our situation of powerlessness, and, finally, the limitations of the Writing Project to effect change in schools.

One response to the limitations placed on teachers was that in our classroom, at least, we have control. Many of us do creative things in our classrooms in spite of the school. We close our classroom door to isolate ourselves and our students from a host of negative factors so we can do some positive things. And we are successful--up to a point. But many of us are not satisfied. It's not enough. The school atmosphere seeps through our closed doors and poisons the classroom environment. In this short article, I want to explore two reasons why this is so. Trying to do the best we can in a bad situation can only be a limited solution, one which leaves us isolated and frustrated and diverts our attention from basic problems that we must sooner or later face if our schools are to be reformed.

One thing that limits us is the way the school day is organized, the factory model of seven or eight 40-minute periods. There

is no connection among classes for students. They have six different areas in which to perform each day, each one having nothing to do with the others. They are in six different boxes, each one sealed off from the rest. Students have to start something new six times each day--six beginnings and six endings. They're on an assembly line and the important thing is to keep the line moving. It's an impossible situation, this chopped-up school day with its six do-nows, six aims, six sets of behavioral objectives and six summaries.

This assembly-line teaching is the norm forced on teachers in high school. It restricts our teaching and pressures us to be performers who can hypnotize our students with our virtuosity for 30 minutes of real class time each day. At its worst, it entices teachers to become control managers, passing out worksheets to keep the students busy. Getting through the period in one piece is the hidden but real behavioral objective of the school day as it is now set up.

Another thing that we teachers can't "close our doors on" is the attitude of students toward us, other students, and the school. Mickey Bolmer gave us a chilling example of this in one teacher's classroom in a piece he wrote for last summer's newsletter. Granted, it was an extreme example of the breakdown of discipline in a classroom, but the attitudes of students that it illustrated were recognizable, and, unfortunately, true for many other high school classrooms in the New York City system.

Why do so many students fail to respect their teachers, fellow students, and the learning process of the classroom? What happened to the basic order that was a given, that could be counted on by a teacher when she walked into a classroom? In recent reports on education, this area of concern has come to be known as the "hidden curriculum." I like this expression because it hints at the idea of a foundation, a background against which our teaching takes place. Most of all, it's a shared set of assumptions about school underlying the basic respect between teachers and students, students and other students, and teachers and administra-

tors. When present, these assumptions enable learning to take place in the classroom. They make relationships between people in the school possible. This common vision is what makes the school run because all the groups believe in it.

The student who shares a common vision with the school is the student who is successful and who sees school as a way to college and the good life. He may or may not like school, but he submits to its rigors because of future gain. There are students in inner city schools who share this vision, but the majority do not. They don't see the school as helping them with their future. The vision of the school for many students has broken down so they will no longer obey its rules, even if teachers tell them it's what is expected of them. They don't buy it. What this leads to are high schools that don't function. The relationships within the school, without a basis, break down and chaos results. Teachers retreat to their classrooms, try to shut out the chaos, and attempt to make the classroom, at least, into a rewarding experience. But the school without a vision has no center to hold things together. The individual classroom is affected, and teachers burn out trying to bring some sanity to a situation out of control.

One way we keep our sanity is by belonging to the Writing Project. In it we find the vision lacking in our school, a vision that binds us together in a community of writers and teachers. But our school is where we operate day in and day out. It is there we have to forge a new community. If we don't focus on the school, we might be accused of only using the fellowship of the Writing Project to escape from the isolation felt in our school. The school, our school, is where the battlefield is. Strengthened by the Writing Project, we have to turn back to our school and reform it. Only we, leading the way with students and parents and dragging the administration along, can do it. It's our responsibility and great opportunity.

But it won't be easy, because the values of the Writing Project are in conflict with the values of the school. This conflict is

not something some of us are manufacturing, imposing our political beliefs on the Writing Project's agenda, veering it off course, and pushing it into the business of belief. The Writing Project does have a set of beliefs; not imposed beliefs, but beliefs which spring from the very nature of the writing process itself, and we should be aware how these beliefs conflict with the practices of many of the New York City schools in which we teach.

Just compare for a minute the notion of power in the writing process and power as it is used in your school. In the writing process, individuals are empowered. They are not presented with other people's answers. They begin the search, no matter where it leads or what form it takes. Free choice and responsibility are at the heart of the process. Power in the writing process is also nonjudgmental: writing groups don't condemn, but support and help. Active listening is based on the premise of respect for the individual. The Writing Project preaches the writing process and practices what it preaches by sharing power with its members, being nonjudgmental, and respecting the individual. This is why so many of us feel at home in the Project: the openness of the Project is the openness of the writing process. This is the wholeness that we cherish.

On the other hand, the schools where many of us teach use power in a very different way: it is closed to all but the few who use it in a top-down, hierarchical management system which is discredited everywhere except the Army and the New York City public school system. This autocratic use of power taints everything in the school: personal relations, curriculum, schedule, and teaching styles. The school does not, of course, advocate any of the negative beliefs it practices. You would be hard pressed to find a principal who advocates top-down management, one who is against free choice and an open atmosphere which empowers teachers and students. But what has happened is that the authoritarian beliefs have become institutionalized in the schools. We have the anomaly of good principals carrying out restricting practices that have become institutionalized over a long period of time.

The point I want to make is not about the closed atmosphere of our schools or the openness of the Writing Project. We already know this because we have worked in both. My point is to show their mutual exclusiveness. The institutionalized beliefs and practices of the schools in which we teach are opposed to the beliefs and practices of the Writing Project. They are at odds with each other. They cannot coexist and we are fooling ourselves if we think they can. Finally, if the beliefs and practices inherent in the writing process and in our Project are to have a chance to affect the lives of students and fellow teachers as they have affected our lives, then we must take up the challenge and reform our schools.

Bill Delaney  
Schomberg Satellite  
Academy

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## Struggling with Time

After two years of working exclusively as a teacher-consultant for the Writing Teachers Consortium, at a point where I was thinking that it was necessary for me to return to a classroom, I had the opportunity to blend teaching with consulting in the WTC's new Language and Learning Core. Now that I am back in the classroom (at least, part of the time), I find that two years of consulting work have made me more willing to experiment and take chances. This term I used reading logs for the first time, did an extensive class interview project, asked students to write regularly about their reactions to class activities, and helped them to produce two class magazines. Teachers whom I consulted with were able to visit my class to see certain techniques and I, in turn, could help them implement similar projects with their own students. Still, despite all these pleasures, I could never fully dispel the feeling that I was failing in one particular way that had never posed a problem for me before I began consulting: I was having trouble functioning within the 40-minute period.

For twelve years, I had been able to plan lessons that worked within that tight time span. Of course, many times Tuesday's lesson spilled into Wednesday, or Thursday's stimulating discussion--abruptly ended by the ringing of the bell--was never resumed on Friday. I had come to expect these oversights in planning or management. I had learned to live with compromise. Why, then, after a mere two years out of the classroom have I found myself struggling all year with the 40-minute period? One colleague told me that I haven't gotten my timing back yet. "When I came back from sabbatical," she confided, "it took me a full six months to get both my timing and my energy level back to where they were." She said this to me in October. Now it's June, and I must confess that I am still struggling with time. Is there more to this problem than just a matter of timing?

Perhaps the consulting experience has liberated me in more extensive ways than I had realized. I have returned to the classroom with different goals, and I'm trying to train students to work in ways that apparently don't conform neatly to the traditional 40-minute high school period. Every now and then, I put students into small groups to discuss literature or to work on writing. I have found that these activities take more time than I realized, particularly with sophomores who've had little experience doing this. I have asked them to work on vocabulary in small groups and, in doing so, watched an activity I planned for a single period stretch into two. Examining and then sharing what people have written in reading logs, or writing about and then discussing results of various classroom activities, have continually taken more time than I thought they would. Some of this I could have done in developmental lesson form but preferred not to do so. As a result, time evaporated as students made their way cautiously through new experiences.

The battle with time has even occurred during fairly traditional literature discussions. When I began a discussion of a chapter of Light in the Forest by having the students read aloud from their logs (rather than by asking them to respond orally to some

motivational question), ten minutes flew by rather than two. When I stopped a heated discussion in midstream to ask students to write and then share, the period ended before I reached certain key points I wanted to raise. Asking students to identify thinking strategies used in reading log entries took two days, not the one I had anticipated. In short, when I wanted to make writing an integral part of the way we learned within my classroom, I was frequently losing the race with the clock.

I noticed that students needed more time to become comfortable with the structure of my class, with activities new to them. After asking the class to discuss something in small groups, I would find four students (all of whom knew each other fairly well) staring awkwardly at one another, unable or afraid to share their opinions and feelings with each other. It would take nearly half a period of cajoling from me to get them talking and when they finally loosened up, the bell would ring. They were so unaccustomed to talking with one another about subject matter that they needed more time to learn how to do it and feel comfortable with it than I had originally planned.

It may be that both my class and I just need time to adjust to these activities and that working within 40 minutes is not the problem. Still, I find myself resenting that I must teach in 40-minute segments and, what's more, I am beginning to suspect that it's detrimental to ask students to learn that way as well. So often these days I hear colleagues complaining about the short attention span of students. So many of us (myself most assuredly included) bemoan our students' inability to sustain a thought, to develop an argument, to be satisfied with long range goals rather than immediate gratification. "Television and video have rendered them passive," I have proclaimed to friends. This may be true, but it just also might be that the 40-minute period works against the development of such skills, especially if part of that limited time is devoured by administrative or clerical chores (which regularly reduce the 40 minutes to 35 or even less.)

I would be willing to bet that most of

our best, most ambitious ideas--the lessons that demand complex writing tasks or group work or depend for their success on discussion or critical thinking--become compromised in order to be shoved into 40 minutes. How many of us can recall a class in which an exciting discussion was ended by the premature ringing of the bell? "We'll pick it up tomorrow," we tell the students. The next day the emotion is gone, the arguments are forgotten, and the students have lost interest. How many of us have struggled to work with small groups in our classrooms only to see them cut short by the bell just at the point at which students were beginning to hold real conversations with each other? How many of us have been unable to use video as extensively as we'd like because the length of the film or program we want to show takes up too much class time? These days we are being urged to bring our students into the computer room to write and revise or to create programs for a business or math class. By the time every machine is booted up and all the students are given the help they need, we must pack up because the bell is about to ring. I have seen students get through barely two paragraphs of transcription on a word processor only to be told that if they wanted to use the printer, they had to stop within ten minutes or there wouldn't be enough time. Ideas and skills are simply not being given time to develop. They are being chopped up like liver.

I also fear that it is the very nature of the 40 minute period that reinforces the laziness and passivity in high school students that so many teachers, administrators, and researchers deplore. After all, if a student spends three years in junior high and then another three years in senior high in 40-minute periods, aren't we encouraging short term thinking? Students know it is only the length of a Cosby episode before that bell rings. They have grown accustomed to issues and topics being opened and closed in a single day. They have been trained to regard discussion as the seven or eight minutes before the teacher's summary. They have come to expect the immediate payoff. Is it possible this student generation's inability to sustain long projects, to think

and read critically, and to write extended discourse can partially be blamed on a learning structure that allows no time for any of these activities to be nurtured?

Perhaps I am focusing attention on a situation that isn't even perceived as a problem by most of my colleagues. After all, I must admit that when I think of Glendora, Sharmon, David and the rest of that tenth period class of freshman I once had, I know I would not have wanted to be in a room with them for more than 40 minutes. It is always a class like that one--the group you don't reach; the class you can never get quiet enough; the period you dread and feel only frustration for--that makes so many of us grateful for the 40-minute period. It's our life preserver.

Still, I can't help wondering what it would be like to teach longer periods so that the students, the material, and myself have time to breathe. I also wonder if I am at some professional crossroads. Do I now need to teach in an alternative setting or on the college level to work the way I want and to achieve what I want? I'm not sure. I just know that right now I am still struggling with time, and the struggle has raised questions in my mind about teaching, about learning, and about my own professional future.

Ed Osterman  
Writing Teachers  
Consortium

## Lessons of Howard Beach

After having the same class of students for the past two years (as third and fourth graders), I would like to share some experiences we've had with writing and thoughts about these experiences.

We've done lots of writing over the past two years. Most of our writing started out based solely on personal experiences, then moved to include expressive or reflective writing about our readings (literature logs, reading logs). Gradually, this personal or expressive emphasis has shifted to encompass the use of writing to learn, to discover, record, and think on paper.

Last year we began using the double-

entry journal format while taking notes from factual or scientific books and articles. This worked quite well to help develop note-taking skills and to distinguish fact from opinion. Then, as we watched frog eggs and meal worms metamorphose, the students took double-entry notes in the form of observations and comments. These results were even more exciting and the students loved it. This year, we've gone on many field trips involving science and social studies topics, while studying ants, sand worms, and fiddler crabs in the classroom--all the while writing.

Last November, we visited Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge to explore a salt marsh environment in autumn. Less than two months later, the racist beatings and murder happened in Howard Beach. As we discussed the incident in class, we realized that we had been in Howard Beach, and that Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge is reached via Crossbay Boulevard, where Curtis Sylvester's car broke down that fateful night. We began several days of intensive discussions, as we shared information, articles and photographs. We talked and talked, and tried to make sense out of what is senseless. Along the way, we reached the dreaded realization that this awful thing could have happened to any one of us, all of us being Black, Hispanic, or Asian. And then we began to write. I asked them to write about "the lessons of Howard Beach." Most wrote about racism, and about how they were going to fight racism. Some also asked questions: "Why did whites own blacks as slaves?" "Why didn't people settle this before now?"

I've rarely seen students so eager, so impelled to write, as about this topic of the Howard Beach incident and racism. We shared the pieces, not only with each other, but with a class I had had as second graders who are now fifth graders. It was also our turn to do the hallway bulletin board, and so we decided to share our writings with the school, made a collage of news clippings, headlines, and photos, and called the bulletin board display, "The Lessons of Howard Beach." A number of teachers commented on how impressed they were with the writings, and I sensed they were also somewhat amazed by their boldness.

This was not the first time my class had shared their writing with peers or with others in the school. We've read pieces over the loudspeaker and at monthly grade assemblies, but being the "top" class on the grade, it's almost expected that this class should be the better writers. The Howard Beach writings added a new dimension and stature to writing in our school. I think this type of writing is the logical extension of our efforts to teach writing in the schools. My students moved from personal and sometimes very private point of view writings to the broader, evaluative and critical writing of responsible people in this society. Writing for them is now what it should be: a tool for learning and thinking. And they have also assumed the role of student-mentors of writing for our school, helping to motivate probably far more other students to use writing to learn than we teachers singlehandedly can.

Barbara Batton  
PS 156X

## From a Teaching Journal

NYCWP Classroom-Researcher Project  
Thinking Aloud Memo #2 - April 28, 1987

I'm afraid my "dark side" (Osterman, 1985) is taking over again. This gloomy attitude was brought on a few days ago when a woman in my class at the Adult Learning Center, S., showed me an application for nursing school, an application she could barely read. She'd dreamed of becoming a nurse for years, and now, with her new-found confidence, she's taking the first steps towards this goal. I'm afraid she won't reach it. Though I haven't given either false hopes or discouragement, I feel very responsible, worried that she will soon face even more frustration and pain when she realizes this goal is beyond her grasp. She really is not so fragile that she couldn't handle this; it's my problem, my fear. There's a bizarre transference going on: as the students lose their fear, anger, and feelings of powerlessness, I take on those emotions. I'm angry about what has been

done to them; I'm afraid some won't be able to achieve the level of literacy they need; and I feel powerless when working with the few students who are not progressing.

Some of these students are my age and just learning how to read, hoping to start new careers and new lives; sometimes I'm overwhelmed by the obstacles they are facing. I don't think I'd have the courage to do what they're doing. I'm amazed that they have the hope, energy and confidence to come to class twice a week after long days spent on jobs that drain them and/or facing many family responsibilities. Many of them estimate that it will take two years or more for them to read adequately, but none seems discouraged by this; half the class want to go to summer school, too.

In addition to my taking on all those negative feelings, I'm also in a funk because of the difficulty of being both teacher and researcher. In the NYCWP Classroom Researcher courses we were right in describing the role of the participant-observer as a luxury. It's a luxury I often wish I had, but whatever insights I gain now will serve me well when I return to Walton in the fall. But right now it's very hard to concentrate on patterns and coding for research while I'm so involved with lessons and individuals. I'm too busy doing it all--the whole teacher enchilada--to be able to see, hear and analyze all that I want to know. I also like and respect the students too much, so it's not a simple matter to be objective. Should I include giggles, jokes (let's do a Koch sentence) and warmth in my coding? There's a lot of it in our class. They laugh, tease and encourage. They always "make room" for new students, putting them at ease from the moment they enter the room. As we walk back from the computer lab, many of us walk arm-in-arm, behaving more like high school pals on their way to Abie's for a malted than adults struggling to become literate. Maybe they're finally creating those happy school day memories for themselves. They do and say so many things that touch me, but these things also blur my vision. It's hard to see clearly when I feel so much a part of it all.

What I do know is that most of them are

making progress, facing new challenges inside and outside of the class and feeling a greater sense of confidence and power. ("Not being able to read is like being blind...totally blind to the ways of the world. But now I can see." - B.) All the students I've interviewed said their confidence grew because they saw their progress, felt comfortable being with others who had the same problems, and felt "safe" in our class. A few have also mentioned the support of group work and a "joy" in being able to express themselves in writing. These interviews, conducted in my class, were also helpful to me as a teacher because the students and I were able to set up individual goals and discuss our collaborative curriculum. The interviews and the research can be an important part of their learning.

Questions that still remain for me from this experience are: Why do they have reading problems? What are their coping strategies? Why/How are they learning now? What are their support systems? Are they changing now? What changes are there in self-image and/or world view? What were their school experiences like? What is most useful to them in class?

Joan O'Connor  
Lehman College  
Adult Learning Center

## Evaluation

After re-reading "The Writing Process Orientation" by Sondra Perl, I realize why I have been putting off writing this assignment. There is and continues to be a most "complex shift in attitudes, behavior, ideas and approaches--." The shift is inside me. And it isn't easy to write about.

I think of "before and after" photographs in house and home magazines. There is the picture of the room before decoration and the room after. However, no one observing my outward appearance or my behavior would particularly note such a dramatic change as the "before and after" in the magazines. But I know. I have changed as a result of the Writing Teachers Consortium. So let me count the ways.

1. I have come to confront my own hesitation and lack of confidence in teaching writing. Now when I receive a pupil's paper I feel as though I have had some small part in this student's success. And I have!

2. My own writing has expanded, much as the Chinese paper flower dropped into water. I am writing every day. Well, almost. I have my special places where I like to scribble: when I crawl back into bed in the morning with a cup of coffee; on the bus riding along Flatbush Avenue with a load of sleepy workers; and yet a third place, a simple bridge table set up in our mountain home in the Poconos. It is here that I can gaze out the window to watch the deer pushing at the snow with their noses, searching for my neighbor's treats of dried corn and fresh apples. In fact, another piece of writing using Peter Elbow's "loop writing" techniques has resulted from watching these morning marauders. The piece's title is "Bucky II," but it's not so much about the deer as it is about my neighbors.

3. My own self-observation is most definitely enhancing my ability to work with students and to help them with their writing. It means a lot to me when my writing elicits positive responses from my group. Now I can put myself in my students' place. I realize that my praise of their work can bring them much closer to achieving their best in their writing.

4. Collaborative efforts for teachers are definitely working in the WTC. In fact, one member of our group influenced my choice of an article for our assignment in Writing to Learn. More than ever we respect the condition "work in progress" and perhaps we might even think of kids in this way-- "student in progress."

5. The "audience principle" is much like the "Peter principle" in reverse... all that can be set right, will, by a group of careful and considerate peers. Also, the sense of audience is essential when one is writing, and this is working for me.

6. A sense of authorship has been developing. Ultimately, I am responsible for my own writing. I love the independence this course gives us--and consequently, I try to give my students this same feeling of autonomy.

All in all, is the WTC working for me? Has the WTC, as I reflect on Sondra Perl's "Writing Process Orientation," fulfilled its original purpose?

I'll say it has.

Sydney Langosch  
Erasmus Hall HS

## How the Writing Project Changed My Life

In the summer of 1985, I participated in a Writing Project institute. A lot of energy that July was devoted to convincing ourselves that we are indeed writers since we do indeed write. Not enough, some argued. Okay, others acquiesced, maybe not with a capital "W". Most of us agreed uneasily, not 100% convinced. I figured it wasn't ironclad, maybe, but it wasn't chicken soup, either.

For relaxation, I went to the Berkshires for the month of August. Some people relax by lolling in the sun. I shop. With a vengeance, a fortitude, a dedication, a zeal that can be likened to Mother Teresa's, I shop.

One afternoon, I noticed a display of a new, California-based magazine in a shop I discovered. Both magazine and shop were for large women. As a size 22 woman, I loved them both immediately.

"Let me subscribe!" I filled out the card and paused at the space marked for comments. I mulled, I mused, and, fresh from the Writing Project, I scribbled, "Would you like a New York columnist?"

What could she do? I thought. Tell me no? I'd be just where I am now. For two months I held this debate in my head. Finally I mailed the card.

Very soon I received a note from the publisher. "I'd love a New York columnist," she wrote. "Call me and we'll discuss it!"

I screamed and carried on with astonishment for about two hours while I called everyone I knew for moral support. I then called her--collect.

We chatted about Radiance, its philosophy, and how terrific to have a New York column.

"You are a writer, aren't you?" she asked conversationally.

The longest second and a quarter in history passed, during which I debated at the crossroads. What is truth, after all? What is reality? I felt myself take a deep breath.

"Yes, I am," I said courageously.

"Good. Send me a sample article, and I'll let you know," Alice-the-publisher said.

From that conversation came my column in Radiance called "Seeds From the Big Apple." For a year and a half, my column has been the first regular feature in the magazine --with my name and my picture. Every time, it is thrilling. Every time, I can't really believe it. But I do believe the paycheck.

So now I'm on sabbatical. I had never met Alice-the-publisher, but Radiance and Hanes Fitting Pretty pantyhose were co-sponsoring a fashion show in San Francisco.

"What the hey," I decided. "This is my sabbatical!"

About 300 large-size women attended the fashion show. And people recognized me! They applauded me when Alice introduced me! Two people asked me to autograph their magazine copies! They complimented my jumpsuit and boots! I went home giddy with ecstasy--just how one should feel when her attributes are validated.

But this wasn't all!

A week later, a woman called me from North Carolina. Her ad agency is doing a campaign for Fitting Pretty pantyhose, she said, and would I like to be a "real-life" model in the ad? Alice, the publisher of Radiance, had suggested me. Would I send a recent photo?

I sent two. (Who could decide?)

Her boss called, and in a drawl I'd only heard in Tennessee Williams' plays, he asked if I'd like to come down to North Carolina the next week to model in a fashion shoot. I'd have a hair and make-up stylist, a wardrobe person, all expenses paid, and a salary for that one day that I'd only heard in conjunction with illicit pandering.

After I stopped giggling, I agreed. Then we worked out a payment plan that would not invalidate my sabbatical promise of no other

paid employment. (So don't get bent, Board of Ed.!)

He continued, "Your tickets will be in the mail. Don't forget to bring receipts for any costs you incur, like cabs to the airport, shoes you'll need, anything. We'll reimburse you, of course."

Of course? Of course?! I, who am expected to pay for my own goddamn chalk. Of course? I giggle at odd moments of my life, remembering that incredible phrase.

My ad won't run until my sabbatical is over (in major magazines no less!) when I'll probably need the reminder of how it was: delightful, a fantasy.

You never know where the Writing Project will lead you. In my case, the turns in the road have been fantastic!

Maxene Kupperman-Guinals  
James Monroe HS

## Project Notes

A warm welcome to two new people on the Writing Project/Institute staff. Cynthia Green began work as executive assistant to Richard Sterling on June 1. She comes to us from Fordham University's School of Business Studies where she was executive assistant to the associate dean. Denise Stavis Levine will direct NYCWP's Junior High School Writing and Learning Project. For many years a junior high school science teacher, she is currently a doctoral candidate in family literacy at Fordham and brings with her years of staff development experience in ESL and theater arts as well as in writing.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the first time, the Project will be reaching out to the junior high schools. We have received a three-year grant from Chase Manhattan Bank to establish the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project. In the 1987-88 school year, the program will operate in District 3 in Manhattan, District 10 in the Bronx, and District 29 in Queens. This summer, teachers from these and other districts will participate in a Project summer institute targeted for junior high school teachers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seven Writing Project summer institutes are scheduled this year--at Lehman, in Nassau County, and in London, England. The courses range from the tried and true WTC to a new seminar where international collaboration is introduced. The following people will coordinate these courses:

Robin Cohen and Lydia Page--the Writing Teachers Consortium;

Gail Kleiner and April Krassner--the Open Seminar;

Chris Kissack and Denise Levine--the Junior High School Writing and Learning Seminar;

Lila Edelkind and Helen Ogden--the Nassau County Seminar;

Andrew Galinsky and Ronni Tobman--the High School Students Writing Project;

Marilyn Boutwell and Marcie Wolfe--the Summer Seminar for Adult Educators;

Richard Sterling--the Seminar for British and American National Writing Project Teacher-Consultants. (Ed Osterman will be representing NYCWP as a participant in this seminar.)

The following consultants will be visiting the summer institutes held at Lehman:

- Brian Street: July 6-8
- Mary K. Healy: July 13-14
- Toby Fulwiler: July 20-21

If you are interested in visiting a course for a consultant's presentation, please call the Project office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maxene Kupperman-Guinals entered the Lehman College creative writing competitions and won two awards: the Grace A. Croff memorial prize for poetry, and the Alice Minnie Hertz Heniger prize for children's literature. Congratulations!

\* \* \* \* \*

The Writing Project hits the road! A revised version of the inquiry workshop presented at the November Writing Project meeting will be presented by Paul Allison,

Elaine Avidon, Chris Kissack, Gail Kleiner, Ed Osterman, and Marcie Wolfe as a post-convention workshop at the 1987 NCTE conference in Los Angeles.

Chris Kissack and Gail Kleiner will be co-leading a five-day workshop for 50 students and their teachers as part of a state-wide program sponsored by the Connecticut Writing Project.

Linette Moorman has been awarded a full scholarship to participate in a 10-day workshop sponsored by the Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research, North Bennington, Vermont--Looking at Children as Speakers, Writers, and Readers: Expression and Meaning as a Basis for the Language Arts.

\* \* \* \* \*

All this activity is very exciting!!!

### True Story

Well, goodness, she just didn't know what to write

It's such agony, she feels so uptight  
She considers ideas and rejects them outright.

The topic she's seeking just isn't in sight.

Perhaps it's in mind. She peers closely within

But still hasn't the foggiest where to begin.

Hours pass. The earth continues to spin,  
And still she sits broodingly, hand holding chin.

Her mind is a blank. The words are all gone.

And soon the Academy Awards will be on!  
How long has she sat there? At least half an eon.

The paper fills slowly. There's much to be writ on.

So what does she do? She lacks inspiration.  
No technique nor process comes to her salvation.

She sits there and waits for the sense of elation

That comes with the flash of artistic creation.

The awards have come on. Film writers get mentions.

All kudos for those of linguistic inventions.

The word! Celebrated for deepening dimensions,

But not from this author, despite her intentions.

Despite her intentions, the word is elusive.  
The pressures of time are just not conducive  
To filter out all of the factors intrusive  
And dream up a poem with an ending  
conclusive.

Over time, deep inside, the poem sends off a shoot.

The thoughts will arise that refuse to be moot.

Then springs from a seed, an idea so minute  
As it lives in her new verses slowly take root.

It seems that it's grown on it's own, though she tried.

The thoughts that were hazy just wouldn't be denied.

They rested. They sprouted. They came from inside

Onto paper. She looks back to locate the guide.

Is it time? Must we wait for the time to be right?

Is it muse? Does it creep up in darkness of night?

Does it live? Determine its own weight and height?

Is it hers? Can she claim the ownership right?

She feels that she's finished. Her cramped hands are thrilled,

The birth is completed. The process fulfilled.

Her smile is shortlived; a little bell trilled--

What about next time? Will her pencil be skilled?

Lisa Rosenberg  
James Monroe HS

## 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

## 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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