

# New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

Vol. 16, No. 1 INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY STUDIES • LEHMAN COLLEGE • THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK Summer 1997

## A Note from the Editors

Hello! We are writing as the new editorial team for the New York City Writing Project Newsletter. As you know, for more than a decade, this Newsletter has provided Project teachers throughout the metropolitan area with a place to share classroom experiences, celebrate successes, raise questions about students and schools and engage in a dialogue on educational issues. We are excited to have the opportunity to continue this tradition.

Who are we? Each of us has been involved with the Project in various capacities. We have been in-service participants, summer institute fellows, workshop coordinators and on-site teacher-consultants. Some of us have worked with the Project for only a couple of years; one of us was "a founding father" back in 1978. Some of us are veteran teachers whereas others are relatively new to the profession. Above all, our experiences in Writing Project seminars and activities have transformed our lives as teachers, enriching the ways in which we work with children, interact with colleagues and think about instruction and learning. Moreover, the Project's broad network of teachers has provided us with friends and acquaintances we can contact when we need to design a writing assignment, figure out ways to approach that difficult class, or consider how to structure and develop a particular unit of work. This network stretches from Coney Island in Brooklyn to Mosholu Parkway in the North Bronx and includes teachers of all levels and all subject areas who work in a range of educational settings. We want the Newsletter both to serve and reflect the richness of our professional community.

There is so much we can share with one another; there is so much we can learn from one another. So, we want to encourage you to write for this publication. Write about a particular student or a new pedagogical strategy you tried. Share the results of an ambitious project, whether or not it was a complete success. Tell us what you think about a new book on education. Challenge us with your thoughts about a serious issue facing teachers or schools. Let us know what your interests and needs are. If you have suggestions (about possible issues to explore, about potential themes, about an idea for an article), please contact any of us. We want to hear from you!

And so, you might be asking right

now, what will I find in this particular issue? Read on.

In so many schools these days, one hears the word "reflection" voiced repeatedly. From faculty conferences to department meetings, from assessment initiatives to committees awaiting the changes in Regents exams, the concept of reflection has moved to center stage. For a variety of reasons, educators on the national, state and local levels have begun to ask students to reflect on their learning and teachers to think about their practice.

Of course, reflection has always been integral to the pedagogy of Writing Project teachers. When we write, we pause to consider our process. When we teach, we explore our success and failure in our journals. We are continually asking ourselves questions: What are the different perspectives from which this topic might be explored? What made this activity problematic or successful? Why didn't the students read that story? How can I reach all the students I teach?

In this issue, teachers and students reflect on various aspects of their work. First, several of our colleagues reflect on reading and the teaching of reading. These teachers share a piece of their histories as readers, contemplating the journey they have taken to become proficient readers. Two history teachers think back upon major projects that engaged their students last semester. Both projects build upon collaborative group work and writing. We also get a glimpse of students in the act of reflection. Prompted by their teachers, several students explore the ways in which they write, read and carry out specific classroom activities. Naturally, the issue also includes our regular columns: Steal These Ideas and Project Notes.

Please note: It is our policy to print student work as is.

## Letters to the Editors

We encourage you to respond in writing to anything you read in the Newsletter. Share your thoughts about a particular educational issue or experience that a colleague has described. Feel free to agree or disagree with a viewpoint expressed.

Send your letters to the NYCWP, Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, Bedford Park Boulevard West, Bronx, NY 10468. Attention: Newsletter.

### Inside

On Reading .....	2
On Group Work in History .....	7
On Student Reflection .....	10
Small Group Network .....	13
Steal These Ideas .....	13
Project Notes .....	14

## On Reading . . .

So much of the writing students do in schools is in response to reading activities and assignments. Yet, rarely do we ask our students or ourselves to make *reading* — the experience of it, our feelings about it, our histories with it — the actual topic of a piece of writing. What would we write about if we explored our lives as readers? What valuable insights might we gain if we asked our students to use writing to consider their struggles and successes with text? How might we all benefit from such self-reflection? As you read these pieces, we hope you will begin to consider the possibilities.

### Stephanie

When I saw Stephanie's writing in my freshman class, I wasn't sure how she made it to college. The little writing she did hand in was hard to understand and didn't seem to make sense. In the classroom she was quiet, almost frightened, so unsure of herself. She stared in amazement as other students in the room saw ideas and meaning in the texts we read when she saw almost nothing. The sentences and paragraphs were simply words on a page. The literature did not speak to her; the voice was missing. I know texts speak to us differently, say things to us based on our experiences and how we see the world. And because Stephanie was so underprepared and could not even summarize a text, her reading and writing in my class were empty of meaning and painfully reflected the struggle she had with both. I wondered if it was possible, at this stage of her education, for me to assist Stephanie in becoming a reader and writer. In order to find out what I don't know, I usually look at what I do know. I began to think about my sons and how at a very early age they found their way into books.

When my son Lucas was born, a friend of mine gave me the book *Goodnight Moon*. She told me all children love this book and to enjoy my reading time with him. As a teacher, I was very aware of the importance of reading early on. When Lucas turned two I thought it was time for *Goodnight Moon*. I wasn't sure what the book held that would interest him. It had strange pictures, with lots of rhymes about the moon and mittens and a red balloon. I did respect my friend's advice so I decided to give it try. What I noticed was that

as we read, Lucas and I changed the text. Instead of saying hello and goodbye to the items mentioned in the book we said hello and goodnight to the things in our world: Goodnight Daddy, Grandma, crib, Bert and Ernie etc. We took the book, added our own voices, and used it in a way that was meaningful for us.

My son Rory has a different interaction with the book. When he turned two, I looked forward to our reading *Goodnight Moon* but he was not interested. Funny, I was so sure that because I found a way to get Lucas involved, the same method would work with Rory, but it didn't. Instead, his favorite book now as a three-year old is *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. This story is based on action/consequence. If you give a mouse a cookie, then he'll ask for a glass of milk, then he'll want a straw, then he'll want a napkin to wash his milk mustache, and the connections continue. Rory must have a glass of milk and a cookie when we read this book. He demands this. He finds his way into the text in a different way. As I read a page, he pretends he is the mouse. He repeats the name of the object the boy gives him and then says thank you. He doesn't use his voice but a high-pitched pretend voice to respond. He likes to stick to the text. Though at first I thought Lucas's and Rory's strategies to enter the text were different, as I write this I see connections. They both listened to each sentence in the text and found a strategy to help make these sentences have meaning. Lucas turns the book into his world and Rory becomes a character. They were active readers. Something told me that these observations could teach me how to assist Stephanie.

I noticed that being in a book group began to draw Stephanie out of her shell. Her group was reading *The House on Mango Street*, asking a lot of questions and working together to figure out what the author was trying to say to the reader. The modeling of reading, asking questions and figuring things out as a group seemed to help Stephanie. She began to see that a book is not just words. The author writes to voice concerns, issues, stories and the reader has to work, not just remain passive. When I heard Stephanie pose a question to her reading group about something she didn't understand, I knew this was a breakthrough. Being part of a reading group offered her a view of what it meant to be a reader. She was being read with and read to.

I was reading Mike Rose's *Possible Lives* when something said by a Brooklyn teacher he interviewed struck me. She discussed the need for students to look closely at what they read, especially more difficult texts. She had her students keep a three-column log as they read. The first column was the place to say back what they heard in the text, the second was where they recorded the author's intent and the third was for their reflections. This method reminded me of the descriptive review process where readers of a student work go line by line first saying back what's there then moving to an interpretation of the text. It also reminded me of how we read with little children - slowly, line by line. We were about to read "The Konk" by Piri Thomas. On the surface it seems like a very simple story about his experience with straightening his hair. But it is more about identity and race. I wondered if the log strategy would enable Stephanie to see that authors tell a story for a reason, that we often need to read a text more than once before it speaks to us, that as readers we need to do some work to get at meaning, and that this exploration can help us learn about ourselves and the world.

I worked with the class and watched how they struggled as

---

### Newsletter Staff

Benita Daniels, *Newtown High School*  
 Ed Osterman, *New York City Writing Project*  
 Tracy Peers Pontin, *Abraham Lincoln High School*  
 Margaret Timmins -Knoesel, *Academy of Mt. St. Ursula*  
 Becky Walzer, *Urban Academy*

Desktop Production: Eileen Cropper

we went line by line, paragraph by paragraph. I knew at the end of this session the entire class, not just Stephanie, got a new view of what it means to read. We continued to practice this technique and I noticed that as Stephanie got better at it, her writing shifted. She could more skillfully write about what she read. She knew how to begin to locate the author's voice in a text and it spoke to her. She began to learn how to ask questions and how to say she wasn't sure about what something meant. She was interacting with the text.

By the end of the semester, I saw real growth in Stephanie. She was keeping up with the work and was more social in class. Her portfolio letter talked about the growth she saw in herself. I struggled with whether or not she should pass the class. Her writing and reading were still not where they should be for a college freshman. I sat with this uncertainty for many days and I'm still not sure I made the right decision by giving her a passing grade. I do hope Stephanie is reading and writing. But I can't be sure.

Ronni Tobman-Michelen  
New York City Writing Project

## My Mother's Lap

There were very few books at home, and looseleaf paper was a rare commodity. Wishes for a merry Christmas or happy birthday were always made orally, and grocery lists were kept mentally. There just didn't seem to be a need for the written word. In fact, I can distinctly remember my mother saying that Americans were too dependent on pen and paper — a remark she made one day as she watched me work out a double-digit multiplication problem in my notebook.

Probably the only time we saw writing at home was when my mother wrote my grandmother in Italy — a chore done for the sole purpose of saving the cost of a telephone call. These tasks were long and tedious for her. She would spend the better part of the day at the kitchen table scratching her head, crossing out word after word. At her feet would be at least four or five balls of crumbled paper. After her letter was complete, she'd mumble something about all the wasted looseleaf. At home, paper was to be used sparingly and for adult purposes only. For us kids, Mom would bring home some deposit slips whenever she went to the bank. My sisters and I would turn the slips over and play a game that we called "pretend writing." We'd draw a few curvy lines and circles and pretend that they were love letters from our sweethearts (who at the time were Batman and Robin) or letters to a Grandma we'd never met. We'd read them aloud to each other and to Mom and each time the contents of the letters would grow more fantastic. Those letters were alive with our hopes, dreams, and fears. There was nothing we couldn't read or write about....

But this pretend writing pretty much ended with the beginning of elementary school. Now there was no time for pretend writing. Now it was time for the real thing. And the real thing was very complicated and scary. There were letters that were tricky to write like Y and W, and some letters that made two sounds and still others that made no sounds at all. Later, there would be two reading groups: The Bluebirds and The Red Robins, and there were purple basal

readers. We had to read aloud in front of everybody and answer questions, and sometimes the answers were wrong. "Sound it out," Miss Stechenberg would say, but sometimes the sounds never came.

Then came that horrible day when she sent me home with a letter. I didn't cry; well, at least not until I got onto the bus. I stared out the window so that no one could see my tears. As the bus driver neared my stop, I could see my mother on the corner. She was holding my little sister who was twirling her finger in my mother's long black hair. My mother was smiling, and when my mother smiled her whole face smiled. I thought about how her smile would disappear after I told her what had happened. For a second I considered not telling her at all, but I knew I couldn't do that. She had to know. I ran to her, wrapped my arms around her waist, buried my face in her belly and began to recount the entire ordeal. She put her hand under my chin, raised my face, and asked to see the letter. She didn't wait to get home to open it. She opened it right there at the bus stop. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. I saw my mother shake her head and put the letter in her pocket. She hadn't understood the letter completely, but her silence told me that she had understood enough. "We'll have Daddy read it when he gets home," she said.

At about eleven o'clock, I heard my father pull into the driveway and the garage door open. I jumped out of bed and ran down the stairs with my little sister not far behind. My father was

**If I couldn't sound out an entire word, she'd try to sound it out for me, all the while stroking my hair and encouraging me to move on.**

about to sit down to dinner when I presented him with the letter and told him all about the heartache and strife that came with being in the first grade. He told me to be quiet and read the letter to himself as my little sister squeezed onto his lap, anxious to get a glimpse of the mysterious writing that had caused so much worry and confusion. He read it and then explained the contents to my mother. It seemed that Miss Stechenberg, worried about my lack of progress, had suggested that my parents find me a tutor.

So the next week with my purple basal reader in one hand and my mother's hand in the other, I reluctantly walked across town to meet my new tutor. My mother had gotten her name from a neighbor. I don't remember much about Carmen or about our sessions together, but I remember that she was young and would let me feed her fish after every session. I met with Carmen two times a week, but it soon became obvious that I needed more than that.

Every homework assignment presented a new struggle for me. My mother knew that we couldn't turn to Carmen every time there

*continued . . .*

was a problem, so she sent me to my neighbors, the Hearnases. Mr and Mrs. Hearnases had four teenage children who were often left home unsupervised, so going there was always a wild experience. The youngest, Laura, was my tutor. I'd sit with her at the kitchen table and try to concentrate, but found myself more concerned with her long-haired boyfriend sitting in the living room smoking a very funny looking cigarette. I didn't like going there. To be honest, I didn't like going anywhere for tutoring. I resented having to leave home just so I could learn something. It was upsetting for all of us. There were times I would even have to miss dinner with the family — an unforgivable act in most Italian households.

One evening, after having spent hours trying to make sense of my basal reader, I put on my coat to leave for yet another visit with the Hearnases and was about to walk out the front door when my mother stopped me. She sat down, told me to take off my jacket and sit on her lap. She told me to open up my book. I did what she asked not quite understanding what the point of it was but willing to do anything that required sitting on Mommy's lap. "Now open up to your homework," she said, "and let's read." She pointed to a word and said, "Come on, sow - dat - out," which meant sound it out. Her chipped nail polish underlined each letter as I struggled to blurt out a sound. If I couldn't sound out an entire word, she'd try to sound it out for me, all the while stroking my hair and encouraging me to move on. Sometimes, when she had trouble reading words, I would remind her about the silent e and short and long vowel sounds. This helping each other along went on for quite a while. We'd spend at least one hour of each evening reviewing what I had done in school that day. I think those hours together were probably the most intimate moments my mother and I have ever shared. Maybe it was just the time alone together or maybe it was that we shared a struggle. I don't know. All that I know is that as a child I looked forward to that time spent with my mom.

Although the sessions required lots of concentration and hard work, they were also filled with a peace and intimacy that did not exist in the classroom, or with Carmen or the Hearnases. I can still see her chipped nail polish moving across the page, and I can still hear the dangling vowels of her Italian accent. Together, we slowly entered the world of the written word — a world that was so different from our own.

As I look back now, I think that what occurred in the classroom was little more than a "getting to know you" kind of experience with reading and writing. My relationship with reading and writing was superficial and formal. It occurred in a room full of strangers. I believe that it wasn't until I sat securely on my mother's knee that I was able to apply the concepts I had learned in class. My mother, by bringing the classroom into the privacy of my own kitchen, by struggling along with me, was able to bring my two worlds closer together.

Rose C. Pasquariello  
Martin Luther King, Jr. HS

## Comics

When I recall growing up as a reader, my most prominent thoughts go back to comic books. Yes, there were Dick and Jane with their dog Spot, but that was just something we had to read to keep the teacher happy. There just wasn't any excitement in reading the books that they had in school, at least not like in comic books. So I read them after school, homework permitting, and waited for the end of the week. It was at this time that my allowance came due, and I could once again add another book to my collection. A comic book, that is.

Saturday morning would arrive and as usual I would have no problem getting up, as was the case during the week. Getting dressed wasn't given a second thought as I put on whatever fit and made some excuse for not being hungry. Out the door I bounded on my Saturday morning ritual which I knew so very well. Some mornings I would stop for a friend, but on other mornings it was every man for himself. No one was going to deny me my opportunity to buy the last

**There just wasn't any excitement in reading the books that they had in school...**

copy of a desired Superman story, especially after waiting all week.

The candy store where I shopped was a kid heaven. One wall of the store was dedicated to books. Comic books followed magazines of every description all the way down to the end of the store where the adult books were kept. We seldom ventured down to that end because there were just too many grown ups. The center aisle of the store contained toys and the far wall had cards of all types. The store was owned by an extremely large gentleman named "Little Joe." He resembled a cartoon character called Bluto who occasionally got the better of Popeye. Fortunately, he liked little kids, or maybe it was just our allowance money. Whatever the case, we were allowed to peruse the new books and I always spent every cent I earned in that place.

As I reflect back on my joy of reading comic books, I guess it was a combination of things which attracted me to them. First and foremost, I was drawn to the brightly colored characters who dressed in futuristic clothing and had the ability to do superhuman feats. The matching dialogue was quick and kept pace with the action. They often forced the reader to imagine the unimaginable and to think of things differently than we were normally accustomed to. Anything was possible in these books, and they left the reader hungry to explore future story lines.

This was not the case with my books from school.

Mike Tuscano  
Theodore Roosevelt HS

## The Boy Who Read While He Ate

Once upon a time there was a boy who read while he ate. His mother would "tsk" her teeth and scold him that reading at the dinner table was impolite. The boy's reading habits exasperated her and so she warned him, "If you're not careful, you're going to eat that book instead of your food. Then you'll be one sick little boy."

But still he read and then he read some more. One evening the boy's mother cooked some soup and he spilled it on his shirt. Another time she prepared his favorite dish: mashed potatoes. He stuffed his mouth with the mashed potatoes, without taking his eyes off his book. "Wipe your nose, dear," his mother advised coldly. As he reached up to wipe the pasty mashed potatoes from his nose, the mother fretted to herself, "Does my son like the book better than my cooking?"

The boy's father worked hard all day at his job. He was happy to come home to a peaceful dinner where his young son did not bother him very much. Yet the man worried that all his boy did was read. They never discussed sports or even the cute little girls at school. He wondered, "Does my son think he's smarter than me? Is he ashamed of my job as a laborer?"

The boy's parents went to his school to discuss their son's academic progress with his teacher. They were very happy to hear the teacher's wonderful comments. He was progressing nicely, according to the teacher.

And yet: "We're concerned that all he does is read," they told the teacher. "He even reads while he eats—and not just at the dinner table, at all meals, morning, noon, and night."

"Hmm," replied the teacher. "Well, that is certainly peculiar behavior for a little boy. But since I am a teacher, I must say that I am happy to hear he likes to read. Still, I understand your concern. Your son is not very sociable with the other students."

They discussed this matter for a good long while. The teacher assured the boy's parents that he was a normal little boy. They went home and—sure enough—there was the little boy sitting at the kitchen table eating dessert and reading a book. A bigger book than he had ever read before. The parents were so perturbed that they did not ask him how he was but only sent him to bed. The boy slurped the remains of his chocolate pudding and rushed to his room.

The next morning the mother decided to test her son. Instead of giving him his favorite sweet cereal for breakfast (with games and stories on the box so he could read while he ate), she substituted a nutritious one. The boy's mother waited apprehensively, fretting that he would discover the change and complain to her. Upon spooning the nutritious cereal into his mouth, the boy seemed to grimace ever so slightly. But instead of complaining, the boy simply drew the new cereal box closer to him and read the ingredients and then the puzzles on the back.

Reading is certainly good for you, the mother thought as she cleared the breakfast dishes, but too much of any one thing is not good. She tried to understand why the boy read while he ate. There must be some special reason. She decided to ask him why, but when they sat down to dinner, a book stood upright against a soda bottle and she could not see her son's face. So rather than disturb him from his meal, the mother waited silently for her husband to join them.

The boy's father was certainly no conversationalist, either with his son or his wife. Instead of responding to his wife's worried looks, he engrossed himself in his soup. At one point during the meal, he cleared his throat loudly, hoping to attract his son's attention. But the boy read on, took a bite of bread, and then read some more.

The meal was especially delicious, the father thought. He knew he only had to smile to his wife and she would understand this. However, his wife did not return his smile with one of her own. She frowned and motioned to their son and pleaded—silently—with her husband to do something. The boy looked so happy reading his books, the father decided. Why bother him about something he enjoys? Conversation at the dinner table is not so important. He shrugged his shoulders at his wife helplessly.

The meal was done and the boy kept on reading, uninterrupted, as if no one were there. His mother cleared the dishes from the table, hopeless as to how to cure her son of this peculiar proclivity. The father left the dining room and, like he did every night, sat in his favorite chair and clicked on the television.

Steven Chernigoff  
Theodore Roosevelt HS

## My Reading History

I can't remember just how old I was when my father started to read to me. Since my father was such a strong advocate of a good education, I think he may have started to read to me the minute I was born. He would read everything out loud: the newspaper, the Bible and even the encyclopedia.

I can remember when I was about three years old and growing up in the Caribbean, my father and I would sit around the dining room table, the huge encyclopedia in front of us. It was the Young Students' Encyclopedia, filled with colorful illustrations and detailed information about each illustration. I would sit in my father's comfortable lap as he pointed to each word as he read. Carefully pronouncing each word, I always thought my father was the best reader in the whole world. One night he read about the U.S. Enterprise. It was the largest air carrier at the time. What caught my attention was when my father told me that this ship was the size of about five football fields. I was in awe. He further explained the number of aircraft that it carried, and the number of men who were aboard. I went to school and told all my friends about this U.S. Enterprise, but no one believed me.

I was three years old when I started kindergarten. Everyone thought my parents were crazy to send me to school at such an early age, especially since they had to pay money in order for me to attend. My father said that if I was old enough to sit around the dining room table one hour every night to listen to him read the encyclopedia, I was definitely ready for school. At first, I was a little apprehensive about school. This all diminished, however, when my father started to come to school during his lunch break, which was usually around story hour. I was overwhelmed. He would sit with me in the tiny chair that was really much too small for him. All crunched up my father would sit for about 20 minutes and listen to the story with me.

I loved fairy tales, especially *Cinderella*. My teacher had a big

blue book filled with hundreds of fairy tales. I referred to it as the big magic book. As she read, she would pause and show the pictures to the class. We were always filled with awe as we saw the exciting scenes from each story. I always loved the dresses these fairy princesses wore. These dresses were small at the waist and would come out in an elegant sweep, trimmed with bows and beautiful laces. I would pray everyday that I would get a fairy godmother just like Cinderella.

I loved fairy tales so much that my father went out and bought me a collection of "magical books." *Snow White*, my favorite *Cinderella*, *Thumbelina*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc. It was no surprise that these were the first books that I learned to read on my own. By the age of five, I was helping my teacher to read stories to the class. I couldn't read as well as she did, so I always wondered why she made me do it. Anyway I did feel special, and my teachers always gave me candy at the end of each session. There was no doubt about it, I loved to read.

Throughout elementary school my reading improved as I went along. So did my reading with my father. I was the one doing the reading now, occasionally asking my father the pronunciation of a word. I wasn't introduced to the library until the 4th grade. My teacher, Mrs. Helen, had assigned a paper that required research. She suggested that each of us pay a visit to the library. Next to my elementary school was a huge cemetery, and next to the cemetery was the library. It was an easy walk and I was surprised that I hadn't visited the library earlier. I had encyclopedias at home, which I used for research, but Mrs. Helen told me I could not use my encyclopedias anymore because they were old and outdated.

My first visit to the library was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I had tons of books at home (at least so I thought) but the library seemed as if it was made of books. As far as my eyes could see were books, different colors and sizes, paperback and hardcover. It was very busy when I arrived. Kids my age, teenagers, adults, everyone in search of a book.

In seventh grade, I was introduced to *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys* mysteries. Now I read at my own leisure. I can remember the day my homeroom teacher came in during our free period. She told us that we could do anything we wanted to except to make noise. My classmate Floyd had a hardcover book with three boys on the cover holding a flashlight. I was really bored, so I asked him if I could borrow it and he said yes. I read *The Hardy Boys* straight through my free period. I couldn't close the book and I finished reading it the next day.

Within the next year I must have read every *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* that my library carried. In the 8th grade I transferred to a different school, because of the death of my father. I went to live with my grandmother. I was in a new school and I was in mourning. This was a very complicated point of my life; I couldn't read anymore because it would remind me of my father. Books were cursed; the time that I used to spend reading was now spent watching television, anything but reading. I only read things that were assigned at school. My mother, who was really worried, brought me to the United States.

Upon entering Richard R. Green J.H.S. in the Bronx I was withdrawn and timid, still refusing to read. I managed to maintain this attitude until my English teacher, Ms. Farrar, assigned the book

*To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was doubtful at first because the book was so thick — it had 500 pages. I had never read anything so thick. We were going to be tested on this book so I had to read it. To my surprise I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and my love for reading returned. It was the first book that I had ever read that really made me stop and think. It had a powerful impact on me. I was especially drawn to Atticus Finch, who reminded me of my father. A few weeks later I entered the Wakefield Branch Library and received my first library card.

Throughout high school I was a very avid reader. I read romance novels, mysteries, anything to satisfy my insatiable desire. I was a regular visitor to my library. I was always consumed in a book. The only class that helped to mold my reading was my 12th grade English class. My teacher, Mr. Polanco, introduced us to Shakespeare. At first I didn't like the idea but as we read *Macbeth* I loved it. The language wasn't boring anymore. It was art. I received an A for my interpretation of Shakespeare. I now have a genuine love for this kind of literature.

Looking back at my reading history I believe that my exposure to books at such an early age has really been the factor that molded my reading history.

Tricia Kerr  
Student  
Lehman College  
Freshman Year Initiative

## Call for Manuscripts

We know you did something with your class last semester that you want to write about! We are sure you have a story about a student, a lesson or a school experience you can share! We imagine there is a serious educational issue you might explore in writing! We assume there is a book you have read that you would like to review for other Project members! Why wait?

The NYCWP Newsletter is eager to receive your essays, stories, journal entries and reviews. You can use one of several procedures to send us your work:

Mail your writing to the Project office at Lehman College. On the envelope please write "Attn: Newsletter."

Fax your pieces or inquiries to Ed at the Project office at 718-960-8054.

Call Ed with any questions at the Project office on Mondays or Fridays (718 960-8758).

## On Group Work in the History Classroom ...

Collaboration and group work have always been an important aspect of the pedagogy of Writing Project teachers. Below two high school history teachers describe recent successes they have had with projects that depend on the ability of students to work in teams.

### Was the Supreme Court Right? A Collaborative Project

There are many concepts in social studies that are taught best when students apply actual information learned in a hands-on project. I found this to be the case when teaching about the Bill of Rights and the Supreme Court's role in ensuring that government institutions do not deny Americans their Constitutional rights. I therefore put together a cooperative learning lesson which allowed students to act as Supreme Court justices.

The idea for this lesson was given to me by Debra Freeman, the teacher-consultant at Lincoln High School, who had observed one of my American government classes focused on the rights Americans are guaranteed by the Constitution. After the class, Debra and I discussed various ways to give the students a better understanding of what the rights of Americans are and how, at times, these rights are violated. I suggested that we plan something that would reinforce their prior learning of the Supreme Court's role in government. After some research we came up with the following project.

The class was divided into six groups. Each group was given the details of an actual case presented to the Supreme Court concerning individual rights which may or may not have been violated. The groups then had the tasks of evaluating the Constitutional rights that may have been violated and writing up a decision they thought the Supreme Court may have made. The students were instructed that all members did not necessarily have to agree on the decision. The decision that was read to the class was to be the majority decision of the group. Those members who did not agree were given an opportunity to read their dissenting opinions. After each group finished reading the facts of their case and their decisions to the class, an open debate ensued where the students were able to voice their views on each case.

The following cases were used in this cooperative learning lesson: *Argesingerv. Hamlin*, *Louisiana ex Rel Francis v. Reswebber*, *Sheriff, Aschcraft v. Tennessee*, *Schneckloth v. Bustamonte*, *Smith v. Illinois* and *Aguilar v. Texas*.

This exercise was extremely successful. The students enjoyed the opportunity to read an actual case and decide on it as if they were Supreme Court justices. One case in particular, *Louisiana ex Rel Francis v. Reswebber, Sheriff*, stirred particular interest and intense debate.

The facts of the case are: In September, 1945, Willie Francis

was convicted of murder and sentenced to be electrocuted. On May 3, 1946, he was placed in the electric chair and the switch was thrown. Because of some mechanical difficulty, he was not killed, although some current did pass through his body. He was removed from the chair and returned to his cell. A new death warrant for his execution was issued for May 9, 1946.

The students assigned to this case immediately called me over to their group. They wanted to be sure they were on the right track identifying the proper constitutional issue. They were correct when stating it was a "double jeopardy case" because the Fifth Amendment reads "nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb" and an Eighth Amendment case where a person is protected from "cruel and unusual punishment." The group was split in their decision as to whether or not executing this man was constitutional.

After much debate within the group, they came to a decision. They decided that since the original sentence was not carried out and because mechanical failure usually cannot be predicted, the death warrant was constitutional and the man would be executed. Two members of the group were unhappy about the decision and wrote a dissenting opinion. They believed the state should be responsible enough to make sure the equipment worked properly and it was unfair to make this man again experience the electric chair. They believed his protection against "cruel and unusual punishment" was being violated.

The students' decision closely mirrored the decision of the Supreme Court in this case. The actual decision was that no rights had been violated and the man was executed. However, this opinion was not a majority decision of the Court. The decision was made by a 5 to 4 vote.

This cooperative learning lesson took two class periods to complete. At the end of the project, the students were comfortable in their knowledge of the Bill of Rights and seemed to have an appreciation of the role of the Supreme Court. One student commented to me that it must be tough to be a Supreme Court justice because every decision you make affects the entire nation. I was very satisfied at the end of this lesson. I felt that all the research I did was well worth the time and energy. I believe that in some instances the only way for students to really understand is to use the knowledge we give them in a practical way.

Isabel DiMola  
Abraham Lincoln HS

### Students Teaching Students About History

I am always trying to find new ways of helping my students become responsible for their own learning. I try to avoid making my classes teacher-dominated, but realize, at times, it is a necessity when time is of the essence. I was presented with this dilemma last semester when I taught an eleventh grade American history class. I

continued ...

wanted my students to become familiar with some of the historical events they would be studying in the following history course. Once I decided I wanted them to get a flavor of the events they would study further the next semester, I realized this would be a great opportunity for my students to gain knowledge for themselves and, in turn, share that knowledge with each other. Because the class contained readers of various ability levels (some tested as low as the second grade and a few tested post-high school), I also saw this as an opportunity for the better readers to model reading and comprehension strategies so that the less successful readers might benefit.

**THE ASSIGNMENT:**

My American history class was grouped into three's. Each group was given an historical event to address. They were to read and discuss material I gave them in addition to doing research from their sources on their own. They also planned strategies to teach the information to the rest of the class. They were then asked to do some creative writing on the research topic, and, finally, to evaluate the entire process. The entire project took three class sessions and two outside sessions. Parts II and III were assigned for homework.

**PART ONE**

The first part of the project began with the class being divided randomly into groups of three. Each group was assigned a topic from the list below, again randomly, and instructed to research the topic, divide the labor and make a five-minute oral report. The order for the presentations was also decided by random selection. These were the topics:

1. Manifest Destiny
2. Louisiana Purchase
3. Monroe Doctrine
4. XYZ Affair
5. Era of Good Feeling
6. War of 1812
7. Whiskey Rebellion
8. Alien and Sedition Act
9. Missouri Compact
10. Genet Affair

As the students worked, I closely monitored one particular group which contained a good reader, a less than average reader and a below average reader. All three had been previous students of mine, so I was aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses. The poor reader did not finish the readings. Although she was attentive, she was quiet for most of the discussions. The average reader grasped protectively onto a few items. The group basically took leadership from the stronger student whose interpretation of the material dominated all discussions. There were a few complaints from the better reader about doing too much of the work.

When it came time to present what they had learned, the deficiencies of the two students became apparent. The poorest reader was unfamiliar with key terms. For example, she mispronounced common names, saying James Murrow instead of James Monroe. Even when questioned, she did not recognize her error. It appeared as if she had been spoon fed the information instead of having gotten it from the reading. The middle-range

reader demonstrated that she had not done enough research. She didn't know when the Era of Good Feeling occurred. The more significant information was quite adequately handled by the better reader.

Although it was clear that some of the groups did not work as smoothly together as I would have hoped, over all, I felt positively about what happened. Three class sessions were completely student-centered and directed. The group members were attentive and involved. There was a high level of confidence and comfort in this learning process, unlike my experience with teacher-centered lessons.

The peer discussion and division of labor for research and presentation resulted in an ownership of the material. Although the better readers may have dominated, their willing leadership and patient explanations provided good modeling for less successful readers. The groups had been warned before the presentations that the audience would ask questions and this spurred an energetic use of the dictionary and other source materials, something that does not ordinarily occur with individualized assignments. Normally students are willing to overlook words or phrases they do not understand.

**PART TWO**

After the students completed the first part of the project (reading, discussing in small groups and sharing with the entire class), I informed them that their next step was to write creatively on the historical event they had been researching. The students were given the following list of topics and asked to choose one to write on.

- a. Imagine that you are a reporter who witnessed the event your group reported on. Prepare your account of the event to be published in a newspaper.
- b. Assume that you were personally affected by the event. Write a letter to someone about how you were affected by the event.
- c. Write a diary entry concerning your viewpoint of the event.
- d. Interview a personality involved in the event. Write the questions you would ask and the answers you would expect.
- e. What would a conversation between you and a major character of the event be like? Write the dialogue.

I have included two samples of my students' responses. One is a letter to a town mayor voicing concern about the admission of a slave state to the Union, and the other is a diary entry from a Northerner reflecting on how she has been affected by new policies.

*Dear Sir:*

*I am a new resident of the United States and a very concerned citizen. Recently I read about the incident in the local newspaper about the Missouri Compromise and how they permitted slavery. I was or still am greatly affected by how this state applied for admission in the union. My main concern is, if this state became a part of our union, we as citizens have to remember that this is a slave state, and if a slave state like this become a part of us we have to fear that the parts of states in our union is at risk of becoming a slave state too. But just one questions needs to be answered. Could this really happen, and the rest of the states be at risk of becoming a slave state?*

*Rohan Sammont*

Dear Diary,

*We the Northerners have decided to have certain policies that will favor us greatly. For example the policy on high tariffs. Since the goods that are made here in the United States, they will be cheaper than the foreign goods because the protective tariffs will be placed on them. So there will be no competition and the profits will increase because people will obviously buy the cheaper goods.*

*Though the thought of paying taxes was a bit ghastly at first, we found that it was really worth it. Since it helped improve business and trading routes. This improvement I think will benefit us greatly.*

*At first we thought that the admission of new Western states would weaken the Northern influence on Congress. But then we saw that new states could become important markets for manufactured goods.*

*The last policy was placing high prices on lands to prevent workers from moving West to get cheap lands.*

*As you can see, we only favored policies that would benefit us economically, which was great in my case especially for other workers. As when we talk about economics we think about money and this money ends up to the workers one way or other whether directly or indirectly.*

Regina Gerrick

I was very pleased with the writing I received from all my students. These two samples of writing were from two students who, in general, enjoy writing and feel comfortable expressing their ideas in writing. There were other students in my class, however, who did not totally trust themselves enough to express themselves in writing, but also did very good pieces. Although some students may have complained about having to write, they were, as I was, pleased by their efforts and the results of their work.

### PART THREE

The final stage of the project involved student self-evaluation. The students were asked to respond to a series of questions. (For a detailed description of the student self-evaluation assignment and a sample student response, look ahead to the next section of the newsletter.)

### FINAL THOUGHTS

I believe this assignment was enjoyable for my students and me because it gave the students the opportunity to gain knowledge for themselves and share it with the class as a whole. The project was successful, and as I reflected on the work my students did, I realized that there were several ways to make the project work even better the next time. As part of the evaluation, I feel that questions regarding strengths and weaknesses, as well as reading and comprehension issues, would be beneficial to add. This would help the students focus on their problems regarding reading and collaborative work. The project might be improved by presenting a problem about the historical event that the students would have to work out. A series of questions, or even one question, might have made for a deeper, more focused understanding of the material.

As the students worked through the first part of the project, I

realized that it might have been beneficial if I had provided them with a foundation in research techniques and oral presentation skills to reduce some of the stress the students felt during the research and presentation phases. My students also gave me some interesting creative suggestions as alternatives to the standard oral presentation. They suggested skits, short plays, or raps, which I'd like to offer as alternatives in the future. The next time I do this project with my students, I may also try to videotape the presentations, which then could be used to summarize the major points of each topic.

When the project was completed, the students had successfully read individually and in small groups to obtain information, discussed what was read in small groups, made oral presentations on the information according to their understanding, written about the material in a creative fashion and evaluated their performances. I believe this was a significant accomplishment.

Keturah Nubyahn  
Erasmus Hall Campus School  
of Science and Mathematics

## ATTENTION!

We would like the Project Notes column to be as inclusive as possible. So, please let us know what *you* know:

What Writing Project member/participant has recently received an award or some kind of special recognition?

What Writing Project member/participant has recently won a grant?

What Writing Project member/participant has had a story, essay, poem or book published?

What Writing Project member/participant has presented work (or will be presenting work) at a local or national conference?

What writing/study/reading groups have been created?

Keep us informed.

# On Student Reflection and Self-Evaluation . . .

Reflecting on one's work is a new experience for many students and it is often difficult for them. Yet, many alternative assessment approaches require students to consider what they have learned and achieved, where they have struggled and where they have grown. Three contributors, Benita Daniels of Newtown High School, Becky Walzer of Urban Academy, and Keturah Nubyahn of Erasmus Campus School of Science and Mathematics, invited their respective students to self-evaluate and reflect upon the culmination of a class project.

In her speech class Benita Daniels' sophomores were reflecting on deeply personal memoirs they not only wrote but listened to; Becky Walzer's heterogeneously grouped students were writing cover letters to their autobiographical portfolios as the culminating activity of their writing class. The students in Keturah Nubyahn's American history class were responding to group projects on historical events.

## BENITA DANIELS' ASSIGNMENT

1. How does this writing compare with other writing you have done?
2. Discuss the experience of writing this memoir. What was difficult about it? What was easy?
3. Discuss the revision process. In what way was it useful to you? How does your final draft compare to your first draft?
4. Did you learn anything about writing that you will carry out of this class? Be specific.
5. Discuss the experience of listening to the memoirs. What moved you? Be as specific as possible. Refer to classmates by name.
6. Discuss the experience of reading this work aloud to the class. What was special about it, if anything.
7. Have you been changed in any way by this memoir unit? Explain.
8. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

*In other writings I have mostly written about other things and people. In this memoir I used a lot of feelings and words that I have never used in any other piece of writing. In other writings, I have not used as much detail and depth as I did in the memoir.*

*In writing this memoir I had many experiences. I found out a talent in writing so boldly I never knew I had. I wrote about feelings and people that I never really do hard thinking about. The difficult part was that it was hard talking about myself like that. The easiest part of writing this memoir was that this all happened to me so there was no question of a detail that I would have to get from somewhere else.*

*The revision process is a very helpful rule in the art of writing. Without it the piece of writing you are creating may lack details and other parts you may need. The revision process was very useful to me. It gave me a chance to see what speech was lacking and what I didn't need. When I revise a speech I seem to put in more and more details every time. In general the revision process gives the writer (me) a chance to improve. My final draft compared to my first draft was no way similar. I changed my whole introduction when I revised. I put in five whole new sentences into paragraphs I preferably didn't like and changed words I didn't feel was right for the content.*

*In this class I learned many things I will take with me through the next lifetime. I learned how certain pieces of work can affect a person deeply. I learned many basic things about writing which I thought I already knew. I learned how giving names and places instead of he, she and there. Now I know giving names and places gives people a better visual picture in their minds. I also know to give details about the person or object you are talking about. Doing this gives your audience a vivid sense of what you are talking about. I also learned about simple grammar which I should have learned in junior high school. It was simple terms like where to put he, she, my and I.*

*Listening to these memoirs I saw sides of people in my class I never seen before. Examples were Alissa, Juan, Johnny and the one and only me. Their memoirs told me a lot about those people and what they feel in their heart. When Alissa teared when she said "I always wanted a father" it gave me feeling of how lucky I was and how awful it may be to go through life without her own father. When Juan said "His uncle had contracted the HIV virus and it didn't matter how he got it, you just had to spend as much time with him as possible." When he said it didn't matter how he get it I agreed because it didn't matter. All we have to know is that he didn't deserve it. When Johnny told us of his love over Martha, I respected him for actually telling the whole class about it instead of keeping it to himself. It made one realize that I shouldn't be afraid of what people might say or do when I read a piece of writing for class.*

*The experience I got from reading this work to the class is learning different attributes about the people in the class and the skills they possess. What was so special about it was I got to hear about other people's experiences and what happened.*

*In this memoir unit I learned a great deal of listening very sensitively for parts that I understood greatly and I got a chance to enjoy and appreciate other people's work. Because of this memoir unit I have learned things that I can take with me for years to come.*

*Good job on your teaching.*

*Steven Fray*

*This writing is very easy to compare with other writings. In that this one was a little harder to choose out of the numerous amount of memories which we have. I know that when I choose mine I not only wanted to entertain my classmates but I also wanted them to see what was an important incident that occurred and changed me. This was a great experience for me and a different way of writing. I had to give my listener my thoughts and pictures that came to me and help them to see it by my words. The only difficult thing was choosing a memoir and as soon as I did that everything just flowed right into place from the beginning to the end.*

*The revision process helped me out a lot maybe I felt that I used a word too much or I need to detail this part a little more or give more feeling. The revision improved my work a lot. This piece of writing taught me something. That is a good way to reach your audience is by describing feelings, smells, and other little things enhance the work. This is something I will carry out of the class.*

*Listening to these writings was a privilege. Many of the memoirs moved me. I especially enjoyed how Ernest and the little boy he was taking care of was moving and he couldn't show his feelings because he thought it would be for the best and Matt's grandfather gave him that coin. Reading it was just as fun hoping that they are able to understand. I think it has changed the way I will be writing essay because of the things I have learned.*

CliffordSuperville

### BECKY WALZER'S ASSIGNMENT

Write the cover letter for your portfolio.

1. Describe yourself as a writer and the progress that you've made during this semester.
2. Refer to every piece that you included in the portfolio. When you refer to a piece, explain how you worked on it, what you tried to do and how it turned out.
3. Finally, address the issue of the "purpose" of autobiography. What do you think are the benefits of writing autobiography and what are the benefits of reading it?

You may want to do this in three separate sections or you may want to weave them together. Either way is fine as long as you cover all three areas.

*Well, I never really considered myself a writer. I would write when I felt I needed to get something out of my system, like when I felt upset or happy or depressed. My writing was always simple, not because I wanted it that way, but because it was just the way I wrote. I always wanted it to be perfect—especially the spelling. Perfect grammar and punctuation always burdened me, so I sort of shied away from writing, because of the fear of sounding stupid. Then the thought of writing an autobiography hit me; I felt I had a good story to tell, and all I had to do was write it. It's not that easy.*

*When I first came to this class, I wrote about my mother. It was a short piece, about three paragraphs long, and it really didn't say what I wanted it to. I started adding more details, realizing the simplest writing could be awesome if I just made it more detailed. Like "The chair in the corner" could turn into "The old and beaten red chair, with years of abuse, continued to sit there, in the dark, lonely corner waiting for someone to take it out of its misery into the light." This semester has taught me to expand my writing; I have learned to add little details that give the whole picture, instead of just writing everything down in a dull, monotone fashion.*

*Though I have learned about details, I haven't learned to write about other things in life other than my mother. She has shadowed my life, and when I first began to write for this class she was the first I wrote about. My first chapter is about her, how she let me down as a mother when I was just four. The second chapter is of my salvation, which was my father. The third talks about the realization that my mother was human, that she did regret what she'd done—that I love her very much. I think I should have written about everything else that was going on in my life, like the people I was hanging out with and the decision I made about not doing drugs or having sex. I feel like I'm saying my whole life was centered around the resentment and hate I felt for my mother, when it wasn't. I did other things, like go to school, hang out, whatever. I feel I should have gotten into them, instead of just focusing on her all the time. I did try to write about the girls I was hanging out with, but I wasn't satisfied with it, so I left it.*

*The first chapter was pretty easy to write. I just sat down and got what I remembered on paper—the juice incident, the parties, the men. The second was more difficult; I wanted to explain how I felt at the time—being away from my mother when in my four years I had never spent a day apart from her. And I wanted to explain how I got to know my siblings, and the love we all had for my father because he had taken us in. The third was the most difficult to write. I jumped from being four to being sixteen. I wanted to tell how life went on while I was stuck in the past. My mother's attempted suicide was very hard to deal with, because I had all this guilt. I had all this anger toward her, never really considering her feelings, because I never thought she had any. When I thought of how close to death she had been, I finally realized that I loved and needed her. I also wanted to tell how weird it is now, because when I look at her I see an aging mother, not the young woman she used to be. The thing I didn't make clear was the part about her looking for my love and approval, when it had been the other way around. That's been the hardest thing to deal with in my life and in the chapter.*

*The benefits of writing an autobiography. Hmm... there are so many. For me, writing these chapters has been therapeutic. They made me delve into the past and remember incidents I didn't want to remember. Writing an autobiography is great, because you finally get to say everything you've wanted to. The benefit of reading an autobiography is the understanding that results from it. I feel I understand and know a person when I read their autobiography, and that's what I want from mine—to be understood, I guess.*

Erika Barba

*I'm not sure what the definition of a writer is. But if it is defined as someone who enjoys writing then I guess I would consider myself a writer in that sense. If I could take a bad situation and write about it and have some kind of understanding when I finished then that is what I would consider a writer. When I started to write in this class I felt that I could not keep up with the rest of the class. I also thought that I could not write as well as other people and writing was never about "keeping up" with other people for me. When I realized that I could write at my own pace then I let everything else flow from there. I was use to sugar coating my writing so it would not offend any one and I tried to dance around things and put things in an order that made every one come out as the good guy. But when I understood that my*

writing was for me first, then others second I began to improve in what it is that I really wanted to say from the beginning but never had the guts to say. In some ways my mind still thinks like that but at least now I can recognize it and change it before things go too far. I'm still trying to better my writing in those aspects and I hope that the future of my writing changes in the way that I need them to be.

When the assignment for chapter one was given I started out with a piece that was to be my "chapter one" but turned out to be the first of many chapter ones to be thrown in the garbage. Every thing I wanted to say was all in the lines but even I had to look deeper to see exactly where the emotions were. That was definitely not what I wanted to start my autobiography with. I did not want to do anything half ass. If I was going to write then I wanted it to be as perfect as it needed to be. For chapter one I rewrote the whole thing. I literally started from scratch. Every word was changed but the meanings still stayed the same. I felt that chapter one took a lot out of me and I didn't think that I would have anything remotely good for chapter two. I dug a little bit deeper into myself in chapter two. I tried to analyze my self and my life for that chapter. I tried to talk more about the way I felt, and the way I saw things from my point of view. I wrote the second chapter in Ann's room while Danny was trying to keep my attention focused on what she was attempting to tell me. Even though I heard every thing she said I still managed to write what I was thinking.

By the time chapter three was assigned I was sure that I had nothing else to write about. So chapter three started out with a whole bunch of rambling. Really not saying that much, and I really did not want to revise it because I thought it sucked and there was not much I could do to save it. But I went back (at my teachers request) and added more and took out a lot. It's still not the best chapter but I feel more comfortable with it now than before. In my opinion chapter one was by far the best out of all three.

When people have the need to say some thing or just get out their aggressions I think writing would be the best way to go. Even if that someone feels like their life is messed up and there is no way to fix it, then I suggest that they write about their life and read it over and over until you could see you're mistakes or some one elses mistakes and try to be an amateur psychologist and analyze you're life the best way you can. Writing forms a release and I think every one should take advantage of that at least once in their lives.

Iambii George

#### KETURAH NUBYAHN'S ASSIGNMENT

Now that you have read, reported on and written about an important event in American history, the next step is to evaluate the process. Answer each question please.

1. How did you feel when the assignment was first given?
2. What was your opinion regarding group work before this assignment? Has your opinion changed? Explain.
3. What was your role in fulfilling the assignment?
4. Were you satisfied with your work? Why? Why not?
5. If you were the teacher, how might you make the

assignment more challenging or interesting to your students?

6. You will be asked to write an essay on the topic you've researched. Do you think you are ready for it? Why? Why not?
7. Are there any questions remaining about your topic? Please list for further discussion.
8. If you had to do this over again, what might you do differently?

Editor's Note: As all teachers know, specific assignments or activities do not always succeed with every student or work out in quite the way we planned. There are times, then, when student reflections can reveal to us what *didn't* happen. Student responses that are not entirely positive can help us to rethink a unit or may provide greater insight into how we might need to prepare or support our students for particular kinds of projects. What would you do or consider after reading the following student self-evaluation?

*1. I did not know that I felt any way when I got this project to do, an assignment was given by my History teacher and I proceeded to do it.*

*2. I had not done much group work in the past, so I really did not have an opinion on group work. However, after this assignment I do have an opinion. I do not like it and do not wish to participate in any group activity again. It has always been my opinion that the term "Group Work" was self-explanatory, but in my situation this was not the case. I was left alone to do the project.*

*3. With the risk of sounding redundant, I must once again say that I was left alone to do the project. So I went to the library to get the information that I needed, reading and understanding the assignment, and putting together an appropriate presentation.*

*4. I was not satisfied with the way I presented my work to the class, because I have a fear of speaking in front of people and so I messed up a little in getting the facts across.*

*6. Yes I think I will be ready to write the brief essay on the research topic because I think that I did sufficient research on the topic to write a good essay, and also I am better at writing facts on paper than I am at saying it in front of a class full of kids.*

*8. If I had to do this assignment over again I think that the things I would do differently are:*

*(a) Going to the library earlier, as opposed to waiting until the day before the assignment is due.*

*(b) Getting over my fear or speaking in front of a class full of people.*

*(c) Ask to do the assignment on my own. That way I wouldn't be expecting any help, and I might focus more.*

Petal Sandy

## The Small Group Network: What's Happening?

Sharing our writing, reading and teaching experiences in small peer groups is an essential aspect of every summer institute and inservice seminar that the New York City Writing Project offers. Whether it be receiving supportive feedback on a rough first draft, sharing our responses to a novel or theoretical article, or getting an idea for a way to approach that difficult classroom issue, we value the time we spend with colleagues.

Small groups are also the way in which many of us maintain contact with Project friends and acquaintances. If we cannot attend a writing retreat or one of the Saturday Special Events, the NYCWP network of small group activities provides opportunities to write, read and talk with Project members who live or work nearby. We can arrange our meeting times to accommodate our busy schedules.

Small reading, writing and study groups are proliferating throughout the city. Here's an update on what's been happening:

Enid Kaplan, Susan Herron, Devorah Tedeschi, Laura Pacher and Tracy Peers Pontin have begun to meet as a reading group. After talking with Ed Osterman, Enid telephoned a number of interested Project members who had contacted Ed about joining a reading group. Two of the members of this group teach together; some knew each other from last summer's advanced seminar in literature. All of them live in Westchester or Manhattan. Their first book was William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*.

Paul Allison, Linda Correnti, Eileen Cuff, Marie Edesess, Melanie Hammer, Barbara Martz, Ed Osterman and Alan Stein have been meeting as a study group for a year. Ed formed this group while on a study sabbatical last spring. They read and discuss works related to school reform issues. During the past year, they have read and discussed Gloria Ladson-Billings's *The Dreamkeepers*, Michael Fullan's *What's Worth Fighting for in Our Schools?*, Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children*, and a range of professional articles.

Eileen Green and Rosalind Panepento, participants from several summer institutes and inservice seminars, have formed a writing group for teachers who live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and Queens. Joining them are Theresa Bailey, Dina Heisler, and Eleanor Morley. They have begun meeting at the Violet Cafe in the Village.

Yolanda Johnson of Oceanside Middle School is interested in forming or joining a writing group in Jamaica, Queens. She is free on weekends and certain evenings. If you'd like to join Yolanda, call Ed Osterman at the Writing Project and he'll try to assist you.

*If you are currently participating in a writing or reading group, let us know what's been happening. Please inform Ed Osterman if you'd like to create a particular interest group. The NYCWP's small group network may be the best way for you to stay involved.*

## Steal These Ideas

*Writing Project teachers are inventive in their design of writing, reading and discussion activities. Below, several of our colleagues generously share recent successes with us. We encourage you to adapt whatever you like and hope you will send us one or two of your ideas for the next issue.*

Judy Codner, a special education teacher at I.S. 143 in Washington Heights, has used picture books to motivate writing activities in her seventh grade class. Her students had been reluctant to put pen to paper and she was searching for ways to inspire them and make them more comfortable as writers. After reading aloud Mem Fox's *Wilfred Gordon MacDonalld Partridge*, students were encouraged to develop their own memory pieces, resulting in poetry and personal narratives. Now, her students are working towards using their new-found writing skills and their artistic talents to create their own picture books.

Amy Arundell, who teaches social studies at M.S. 144 in the Bronx, asked her seventh grade students to conduct research on each of the original thirteen colonies. After investigating the history, philosophy and lifestyle within a colony, she invited her classes to use their research notes to create a product that was both eye-pleasing and informative. The students were divided into groups, and each group created a travel brochure for one of the colonies. The completed brochures included the information students had collected through research.

Travel brochures were also an end product in Ines Tavaréz's Spanish class at the Business, Computer Applications and Entrepreneurship Magnet High School in Queens. Ines asked each of her students to select one Spanish-speaking country to research. Students chose particular countries for personal reasons: a friend lived in Honduras, a grandfather came from El Salvador, a curiosity about the Dominican Republic. The class then considered the kind of information to be included in a travel brochure: historical places and events, geography and climate, culture, currency and sights. They conducted research in the school library and then shared what they had learned in colorfully designed travel brochures.

In order to support an independent reading project in which a class of seniors were tackling a range of challenging books, Georgia Christgau and Gail Kleiner of Middle College High School in Long Island City encouraged their students to find adults who might serve as reading partners. In school, Georgia and Gail posted the list of the books being read and the students reading them, inviting colleagues to join one of the students in the reading and discussion of a book. The result? Some students approached teachers whereas some teachers offered their services to particular students. Other students read and talked about their chosen books with parents, older siblings and college-age friends.

Two music teachers have recently and successfully incorporated

*continued . . .*

journals into their classrooms. Al Acosta of M.S. 144 in the Bronx is using journals with his instrumental music classes to provide students with a place to record their progress and problems as they learn to play their instruments. Ed Stone of the Humanities and the Arts Magnet High School in Queens had his students respond in journals as they listened to each musical selection he introduced in his music appreciation course.

## Project Notes

As always, this has been an active year for NYCWP teachers. Sondra Perl, who founded the Project with Richard Sterling and John Brereton in 1978, was named New York Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Those of us who have been colleagues and students of Sondra's know of her commitment to teaching and applaud this well-deserved honor.

\*\*\*

We congratulate several Writing Project friends whose work has been published this year. Jane Maher of Nassau Community College has had her book, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, published by NCTE. We know that many Project members who have read and been influenced by Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* will be eager to read Jane's book on this leading figure in the field of basic writing....One of Jane's colleagues at Nassau and a former editor of this newsletter, Melanie Hammer, has had a short story, "Flight," published in the Fall 1996 issue of *descant* and an essay, "Learning to Shift," published in the Fall 1996 issue of *Flyway*....Nick D'Alessandro, currently working as an on-site teacher-consultant for the Project at both Newcomers Academy and Franklin K. Lane High School in Queens, completed an essay he began writing as co-coordinator of a Project in-service course. The essay, "Things That Don't Have to Do with English: The Hidden Agenda," has been included in Heinemann's new book, *Meeting the Challenges: Stories from Today's Classrooms*, a collection of essays about working with middle-school students....Steven Koenig of Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn has a poetry collection available: *Among the Power*, published by Sandfly Press in Brooklyn....Phyllis Witte of Brooklyn Technical High School will see two of her poems included in a forthcoming anthology, *The Muse Strikes Back*, published by Story Line Press. This collection will include works by women poets ranging from Sappho through Amy Lowell to H.D. Phyllis is thrilled to be included in such company! One of Phyllis's poems has recently been published in the *Patterson Literary Review*, issue #26. For this poem, Phyllis won the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Series Prize Award.

\*\*\*

Elaine Avidon and Barbara Batton, directors of the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN), Cecelia Traugh, director of research at the Institute for Literacy Studies and Mary Hebron, director of the Teaching as Art graduate program in elementary education at Sarah

Lawrence College presented some of the results of the documentation Mary has been conducting of ETN at the Ethnography in Education Conference held in March at the University of Pennsylvania.

Teacher-consultant Ronni Tobman-Michelen, currently working with staff at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx, recently gave a talk at the annual national meeting of Impact II site directors. Ronni was one of several panelists who discussed the challenge of developing and maintaining professional networks. She spoke about the New York City Writing Project teacher network and the structures we have created to sustain and nurture professional growth. Ronni tells us that this meeting gave her "an opportunity to learn about other networks for teachers and, at the same time, to recognize and see the value of the work we are doing."

In February, Lehman College was named as the university partner for Community School District 9 in the Bronx in the Middle School Initiative. Linda Vereline, associate director of the Project, is coordinating these efforts. Linda also presented at the New York City Middle Level Education Conference in May at Fordham University. In her talk, "Building Partnerships for Literacy," Linda highlighted the multiple ways the Project has developed capacity in middle schools throughout the city.

\*\*\*

In September, the New York City Writing Project began an exciting collaboration with eight other professional development organizations in a new program, *Students at the Center (SATC)*. Funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, this teacher development initiative is operating in three cities: Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. Here in New York, SATC will provide hundreds of teachers with intensive opportunities over four years to explore how student-centered educational approaches enhance student learning. NYC-SATC is a partnership among nine professional development organizations and twenty-seven New York City public schools. The organizations participating in this collaboration include: American Social History Project, City College Workshop Center, Educational Video Center, Teachers College Writing Project, Teachers College Reading Project, Youth Communication; and at the Institute for Literacy Studies, New York City Writing Project, New York City Mathematics Project and Elementary Teachers Network. In our next issue we hope to share some of the highlights of the first year's activities and to include an interview with Rick Lear, project director of NYC-SATC, about the goals of the program.

Elaine Avidon, Linette Moorman, and Marcie Wolfe, along with their Institute for Literacy Studies colleagues, Ray Durney, director of the New York City Mathematics Project (NYCMP), Linda Dolinko, a NYCMP teacher-consultant, and Rick Lear, attended and participated in the annual national conference of SATC sponsored by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and held in Chicago.

\*\*\*

We hope you've been able to attend some of our Saturday Special Events this year. The response has been enthusiastic about each of the meetings. In October, Jane Berkowicz and Jean-Marie McAnanly of Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx, Julia Clark of IS 218 in Queens, and Portia Dillard of East Brooklyn Congregation School for Public Service: Bushwick shared some current classroom work. After joining Jane's roundtable discussion on reading groups for ESL students, Project member Sue Case exclaimed, "I'm so glad I attended today. This is exactly what I was looking for." In February, fifty Project members gathered at the Museum of Modern Art for a workshop on responding to art. Under the guidance of the leaders of MOMA's Staff Development Programs, we had the opportunity to take a longer and more intensive look at various works of art as well as consider ways to make greater use of art in our classrooms. We thank MOMA's Karen Miller for her inspired leadership. Reflecting on the workshop, Project member Suzanne Valenza commented, "What struck me was how reassuring it was to know there was such a wonderful resource out there for teachers to use. Yet, how sad it is to realize how many teachers won't know about this and how many times that must happen. I feel very lucky to know about it and very grateful to the Project for doing this meeting at MOMA. Diane Giorgi and I have already put in a call to them for our Saturday class with Bronx high school students."

\*\*\*

Welcome to Nick D'Alessandro, Lona Jack, Nancy Mintz and Harriet Stein, all of whom are currently serving as on-site teacher-consultants for the Project. As many of you know, Nick and Nancy have been teacher-consultants for many years. Nick, a director and English teacher at Hudson River Middle School in Manhattan, has co-coordinated many in-service and summer seminars for the Project. Nancy, an English teacher at Robert F. Wagner Middle School in Manhattan, participated in the Urban Sites Writing Network as a teacher-researcher and has also co-coordinated in-service seminars. Lona, formerly director of the Adult Learning Center at Lehman College, has been a staff developer for ESL teachers for many years and is currently working on a doctorate in linguistics at the CUNY Graduate Center with a focus on language

acquisition. Harriet, formerly an English teacher at Seward Park High School in Manhattan, has also taught writing at Iona College in New Rochelle. These four teachers bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their new roles and have already enriched the working lives of teachers at various New York City middle and high schools.

\*\*\*

Several Project teachers have co-ordinated in-service series for the first time. They are Theresa Davidson, Portia Dillard, Bill Klann, Donna Mehle, Peggy Montgomery, Sonia Saint-Val, William Shanken, and Janeth Wynter-Bell. These teachers have joined our experienced coordinators throughout the city: Roseanna Bigham, Julie Conason, Nick D'Alessandro, Linda Farrell, Debra Freeman, Andrew Galinsky, Diane Giorgi, Claudette Green, Lona Jack, Gail Kleiner, Thomasina LaGuardia, Louise MacCallum, Barbara Martz, Nancy Mintz, Ed Osterman, Nigel Pugh, Susannah Raphael-Thompson, Lisa Rosenberg, Sharon Rosenberg, Evelyn Sheehan, Alan Stein, Harriet Stein, Rosie Steinberg, Ronni Tobman-Michelen, Suzanne Valenza, Linda Vereline,

Nancy Wilson and Phyllis Witte.

\*\*\*

The NYCWP worked in the following schools and districts this year: Alternative Schools (Bronx Regional HS; East Brooklyn Congregation Schools for Public Service, Bushwick and East New York; East New York Family Academy; 850 Grand Street Campus Schools; High School Redirection; Lower East Side Prep HS; Park East HS; Street Academy; Wings Academy); BASIS (Abraham Lincoln HS; William E. Grady HS); Bronx (Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies; Samuel Gompers Vocational/Technical HS; Theodore Roosevelt HS; IS 144; the middle schools of Community School District 10); Brooklyn (Erasmus Hall Campus School of Business and Technology; Erasmus Hall Campus School of Humanities and Performing Arts; IS 218; Middle College HS at Medgar Evers); Manhattan (IS 143; Park West HS; Seward Park HS); Queens (Business, Computer Applications and Entrepreneurship Magnet HS; Franklin K. Lane HS; Humanities and the Arts Magnet HS; Long Island City HS; Newcomers Academy, the middle schools of Community School District 27).

\*\*\*

## NYCWP Summer 1997

### Invitational Summer Institute

*June 30 - July 24*

### Students at the Center

*From Exploration to Essay*

*June 30 - July 17*

### Advanced Summer Seminar

*Literature for My Classroom*

*June 30 - July 10*

### Open Summer Seminar

*Literature and Literacy*

*July 7 - July 17*

### Summer 2

*What's Next? Leadership for Advancing Reading and Writing*

*July 14 - July 24*

