



# The New York City Writing Project Newsletter

Volume 4 Number 1

Winter 1985

## A Note From The Editors

A teacher from my workshop series mentioned at a resource room meeting that she was taking a Writing Project course. Immediately, she was asked to do a workshop. Workshops are very much the thing nowadays. I said to her, "See? When they find out you know something about writing, you're very marketable." She agreed. The demand for teachers who can work with colleagues as well as with students increases all the time. At no other time in its existence has the NYCWP been so well known and utilized to promote literacy in the schools.

This year, the NYCWP has embarked on its most ambitious year, with the Writing Teachers Consortium in seven schools, and additional Writing Project courses in the JHS 234K Teacher Center and in District 12. In the spring, other workshop series will begin and follow-up seminars will take place. This means that more Project members are needed to work as coordinators and presenters and, for the first time, thanks to Chris Kissack, there are training workshops to increase our pool of teacher-consultants. Activity for the Project appears to be ceaseless.

The Project continues to evolve as the number of teachers who have been through different versions of the model expands and new areas of concern are outlined. There is a distinct change in the

character of our monthly meetings, though as always, the coffee has kept its unusual quality and caffeine ratio. It is no longer possible to determine how a person has come into the Project. ("Which summer institute?" used to be the way members were allotted their places: 1978 - The Old Guard, 1980 - The New Wave, 1981 - Le Troisieme Etage, 1982 - The Second Wave, and so on.) Things have gotten beyond the intimacy of the early years. Yet, in conversations over a brioche, it makes no difference, because there's a real curiosity that permeates the room. The newness and wonder are here again. Special interest groups have been created, and it is these small working groups which have enlivened the meetings, making them more purposeful, informative, productive, and creating a broader base of participation within the Project this year.

Our newsletter aspires to report on the changes that are taking place in the Project, publishing pieces that reflect what we are doing in schools in the metropolitan area. In addition to informing you of conferences and events in our Network Notes, we'd like to include letters, book reviews and articles related to the pertinent questions and themes in literacy and education.

Michael Simon  
Literacy Center

## What Can You, As A Project Leader, Do In Your School?

First, don't hide your light under a bushel! With your ideas, expertise, and experience, you can make a difference in your school, and in the Writing Project. When we are experimenting, progress and results often seem slow to come. We feel like giving up. According to the findings of the Vermont Writing Project, "The first six or seven weeks of a writing program is when most teachers want to give up. But by the holidays, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, you have a classroom where a tremendous amount of writing is going on. Sharing helps us not to give up!"

I have compiled ideas from several sources, including the AASA Report on "Teaching Writing." In any of these ways, teachers can support each other, and the Writing Project:

- \* Share writing ideas, illustrated with student samples, at team meetings.

- \* Communicate the effects of your process approach to writing to board members, administrators, and parents, in a letter with student samples - first to final draft.

- \* Invite other teachers to your classroom to observe you present a lesson, or to see your students working in response groups.

- \* Encourage your administration to host and

attend a writing workshop.

- \* Distribute copies of articles you think would be helpful to other teachers.

- \* Publish and distribute copies of student writing to other classes, parents, etc.

- \* Offer to give an inservice presentation to a group of interested faculty

- \* Call meetings with colleagues to talk about problems in student writing and in teaching writing.

- \* Arrange to plan and work with a teacher in a different curriculum area.

- \* Sponsor a student writing competition.

- \* Conduct an assessment of writing-grade, department or school-wide.

- \* Arrange to get together with other teachers to discuss and agree on what constitutes good writing.

- \* Plan to attend an 1984 EAWP Summer Session.

- \* Read, share, and discuss professional materials.

Wendy Strachan, Director  
East Asia Writing Project  
(Reprinted from the EAWP  
Regional Newsletter)

### Newsletter Staff

Robin Cohen,  
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## Echoes

Very often at Project meetings we write together. At the first Project meeting this year the "assigned" theme was "A Memorable Piece of Writing From a Student." What follows are several of the pieces from that morning's writing and read-around.

Why, with so much writing handed in, so many literary magazines produced, do I gravitate towards Barbara, who was in my class in my first year of teaching? Why don't I write about the suicide note in Joe's journal, or Rosa's poem in which she says "rain is like leaves," or Hin Kun's escape story -- written in his journal in chapters over two months, or Tom's journal--a six-month love letter of bizarre stories and poems in tiny computer-like print? Maybe it's because I never wanted to be any of them. I wanted to be Barbara. I still do.

The quiet intelligence, the talent with words, made me nurturing, reverent, jealous. My talent, I think, is as a responder. As a writer? Well. Which piece of hers to focus on? Dream in Which I Am Pursued by Nazis. Why is a 16-year-old having the dream? And what power is in the narration of it, first in prose and then as a poem, that I can remember it so well?

The Nazi dogs--no German soldiers--pursuing her through subway turnstiles, through the terrible rhythmic darkness of the tunnels.

How to end this? Barbara is not a finished story. She graduated, went to Yale, where I visited her and attended a lecture on Elizabeth Bishop given by Harold Bloom, her teacher. I was only five years older than she, thought at one time that we might end up friends. She wanted that--wrote frequently, visited. But I could never shake what I felt the first time I read her writing: that from her radiated a glow. I saw her light and saw myself in shadow. It was something I was incapable of suppressing. I ended our friendship, gradually. At the time I wasn't sure why, but now I know. I was not ready to see my own limitations at the age of twenty-three.

Marcie Wolfe  
Literacy Assistance  
Center

I have right now sitting on my desk a whole set of papers written by my prisoners at Bedford Hills. The topic was "The Best/Worst Job I Ever Had." I drew it from an exercise in the text, never thinking that it would turn out to be so fruitful. With the personal search and looping, however, it really worked. Somehow the pre-writing work we did showed the students how to put themselves into the papers, so that what came out was not five paragraphs of neat, cold, cartesian prose, such as what they are used to producing, but prose that was full of life and reality. I got glimpses into their experiences.

One woman wrote of her job in the kitchen of the prison, and of getting to work at 3 a.m. to prepare breakfast. It was an ordeal to get up at such an hour, but she loved the job because of the hush in a place that is ordinarily full of vacuous noise... and because of the quality of the early morning light reflecting off the clean glasses, plates and silverware set on clean blue tablecloths. You wouldn't think that a prisoner could feel at home in jail, but here was a piece of that world that this woman had appropriated for herself... part of her attempt to find redemption in a kind of hellish situation. She wrote further of having to scour a walk-in freezer so that the metal walls and shelves "shone like new money." She showed me a glimpse of a corner of her life.

Others in the class wrote of jobs outside the prison, waitressing or working in nursing homes and hospitals as aides. Reading some of these pieces aloud, we found a way to share thoughts and feelings about giving ourselves and serving others -- the kind of discussion that, for me, is almost the whole point of teaching. One woman wrote about her work at Creedmore in a ward for the violently disturbed. She was met at the elevator every morning by Pearl, a CP victim in a wheelchair, who asked for a gift every day. She shared a piece of homemade apple pie, her lunch for the day, and felt Pearl's gratitude in her radiant smile. The girl followed at her elbow as she made her rounds the whole day. Others wrote of helping incapacitated elderly people to dress, bathe, eat, get about. They felt especially attached to those who had few or no visitors. One woman described washing, dressing, making up a sad old woman who she had never seen smile until she put a red ribbon in her hair.

It was wonderful to hear women in jail talking so glowingly of working for and helping others who were seen, somehow unimaginably, to be worse off than they were themselves.

David Nicholson  
Riverdale Country  
School

I think I'll have to give in and write about Andy. I've had him pop into my mind several times since I began this writing and have rejected the idea of writing about him because I thought -- 1. he was my student in my first year of teaching, and what did I know then, and 2. that first year of teaching was a long time ago, and what can I really remember? But, here goes.

Andy wrote about Charlie (Bird) Parker. Every single time he wrote. He wrote in great detail. He knew all the music. He knew the harmonics. He knew the biography. He knew the times, the society, the political climate, the intimates, of his subject, Charlie Parker. He had taught himself a large chunk of history, psychology, sociology, and music through his single-minded focus on his boyhood hero.

It was as Professor Fixler said: education evolving from general to more specialized, the usual pattern for Westerners, is not the only way. Fixler told me how, as in his own life, a very narrow early education could be the kernel, the touchstone, could provide the patterns -- what we like to call the study skills -- for a very broad intellectual life. It is another way -- not John Dewey's way, not Montessori's way -- but another way to become an educated person.

Andy was an example of a kid who had reconstructed the world in his mind, starting from inside a small subject.

Thomasina LaGuardia  
Washington Irving HS

Last summer I received a letter from one of my students. Her family had moved from Manhattan to Brooklyn and she was transferring to a Brooklyn high school in September. She had been in my stenography class for four terms in a row and had worked for me in my office as a monitor. We had always exchanged brief pleasantries in the office. But since I depended upon her to do a great deal of clerical work for me, we really didn't spend our time together in idle chatter.

In her letter she spoke about how I had helped her gain confidence in herself as a person. She had failed all her subjects in ninth grade, but, she said, due to my optimistic encouragement, she had decided to show me what she could accomplish.

She had, as a matter of fact, achieved the highest academic average of all the students in the tenth grade Business Career Center Program which I coordinate. As a result of this, she was awarded a \$50 U.S. Government Bond, had her picture displayed in the main lobby, and her name on the Honor Roll.

This inspired her further. She was recommended by me, she wrote in her letter, for the leadership class and was sent as representative of the school to various city-wide and state-wide conferences. By the way, she returned to George Washington HS in

September as a senior and is making plans for college. She has become a feature writer on the school newspaper and interviewed the Knicks recently.

Her letter was important because it made me realize once again that we as teachers can have a tremendous influence on the lives of our students.

Her letter further reinforced my feelings about the importance of negating the low image and low self-esteem many of our students have.

Don't give up on any of the students who seem to be uninterested in your class. Despite their seeming lack of commitment, a small flame might be fanned by your interest in them as unique individuals.

I was warmed by her letter and wept at the thought that, with very little effort, I had helped her in a new direction.

Norma Crown  
George Washington HS

## Writing Is Not An Aim On The Blackboard

My Special Education students and a Special Education class from P.S. 158M worked on a joint project this spring term. Below I have excerpted from the teaching

log I kept on this project.

#1 What did I get myself into? What a way to get kids involved with writing - I'm not even teaching English this term! I don't even remember how this started. I was talking to the teacher I had worked with in elementary school. Before I knew it, we were going to help her students produce a skit for a senior citizens' home. I gave her the list of names of my kids so they could write to us. Her students want to know what life is like in high school and also whether mine could help them with their project.

#2 Judi, the P.S. 158 teacher was very excited about the letters her kids wrote to mine. They certainly asked enough questions! They're "graduating" this year and they voiced their apprehension in their letters. Judi said they did several drafts. They wanted to "get it right" because someone else (not just the teacher) was going to read it. How are my students going to react to the letters? Maybe I'm overwhelming them?

#3 This is a hell of a way to tell my kids I'm proud of them--by dumping a huge project on them--but I want them to get a sense of feeling good about themselves being in high school, being authorities, being hosts, being in control and being knowledgeable instructors. I met with them during official and explained that I thought

they were capable of handling this project.

#4 Not only did I talk the kids into answering the letters, but they also agreed to help produce the show. My class is going to show them a Charlie Chaplin film before we get into any storyboard writing. Also, if any P.S. 158 kids are interested, they can sit in on my kids' art classes when they visit. These things should generate authentic writing--notes to teachers: Can so and so visit the class? Can we borrow the projector? May I be excused from class? etc. But I know my kids feel uneasy. They're asking themselves "What do I write?" "What do I say?" "What am I going to sound like?" They're afraid of making fools of themselves.

#5 They answered the letters. Cranked out those paragraphs. No real bitching about 2nd (and 3rd, or 4th sometimes) drafts. They were self-motivated--didn't want the P.S. 158 kids to see any obvious errors. Most of them enjoyed receiving the letters and they even enjoyed answering them--although they wouldn't admit it till I mailed them.

#6 A little authentic writing today. Anthony wrote a note asking permission to have guests sit in on his art class. Rudy wrote his excuse note and took it around to be signed (at least he said he did). Two of the P.S. 158 students didn't get letters.

Anthony volunteered to answer them so they wouldn't feel left out. I remember when it was a chore for Anthony to put his heading on his paper.

#7 Thank God it's over. I could feel the tension fill the room before the visitors came. Once we introduced ourselves, the tension eased. Rudy put the reel on the projector--it didn't fit. He had to take the projector upstairs with the film. The second projector was no better. It thought it was Pac-Man and chewed up the film. One of the teachers came in to help and burned a few holes in the film. I can't believe how time consuming this was. In the meantime I took them into the computer graphics room for a few minutes while my kids tried to get the projector to work. It's a good thing Gabrielle took the girls to the art room. We talked about a story line. The kids were able to share some ideas but there wasn't enough time. It was not the kids' fault--Judi and I hadn't anticipated all the other obligations we had to take care of. Now I know better for the next time I do something like this.

#8 The students felt bad that they hadn't enough time to socialize. Some of the kids asked if they could write to the P.S. 158 kids. They took story boards and said they would write down some more ideas for them (authentic writing that I didn't even steer them into).

## Point Of View Contest

#9 I heard that the P.S. 158 kids didn't stop talking about this experience. One of them was drawing on the bus on the way home--one of my kids had given her a pad in the art class they attended. My class was very pleased with the thank you notes we received.

#10 There were so many things we could/should/not have done but will use this as a springboard into other projects. My students became aware that writing is a part of their lives, not an arm on the blackboard, and that writing comes in many varieties which they were able to experience; letters to each other and to teachers, brainstorming ideas for a script, story board writing, advertising posters, etc. What was significant to me was how well a small isolated group of special ed students mainstreamed in art classes with very talented art students, reacted to being exposed to yet another group of students. They took on responsibilities; they initiated their own writing; they were role models; they were the leaders; they saw that they could cooperate and reach levels of competence; they experienced success.

Fern Stolper  
High School of  
Art and Design

We, the editors of the NYCWP Newsletter, are holding our first annual point of view contest. You remember point of view! It came after you were seduced by wine and cheese, after you were lured to Lehman College on a sunny morn, or after you stumbled into a classroom in your school at 3:00. What was your last experience with point of view?

Much as you've considered "Babylon Revisited," "My Sister's Marriage," "The Boarding House," "My Sister's Marriage," "Loneliness," "Sandy," "My Sister's Marriage," "Too Early Spring," and "Six Feet of the Country"--consider the following story:

### SCOTT CRASHES DREISER'S PARTY

Quite possibly the most notorious of the New York literary parties in the early twenties was the Dreiser affair. The novelist, not one of the most gregarious of men, had arranged a sedate party to celebrate the publication of one of his novels. As far as Fitzgerald's movements can be determined, early on the evening of the party he encountered Carl Van Vechten, H. L. Mencken, and Ernest Boyd, having dinner at the Brevoort before going to the Dreiser apartment at St. Luke's Place. Fitzgerald, who had not heard of the party, begged to be allowed to accompany them, but no one was willing to risk inviting him. In virtually all of the several accounts of the event, the party is pictured as a glum affair, very like a wake.

The guests -- mostly critics, writers, and reviewers -- were seated in stiff chairs, arranged in a circle, while the host, standing, received his guests in the center. There was little to drink to break down the starchiness of the occasion other than beer. Mencken tried to leaven the solemnity with a few jokes, which fell flat. Van Vechten, according to Llewelyn Powys, another guest, remained seated in his rigid chair, looking like "an aging madonna lily that had lost its pollen." Fitzgerald, on his own recognizance, wandered into the party late, tipsy and carrying a bottle of champagne, which he presented to Dreiser with a meandering speech about his earnest admiration for the aging novelist's great talents. Dreiser put the bottle on ice and that was the last that was seen of it.

1. Who could be telling this story?
2. What could one of these people tell?
3. In what form could that person tell it?
4. Why?

Reflect on these questions concerning the nature of point of view writing before you write a piece that manipulates the point of view of this story in some way.

Prizes! Prizes galore! Here they are:

FIRST PRIZE: A book of your choice, hardcover.

SECOND PRIZE: A book of your choice, paperback.

THIRD PRIZE: A short story of your choice, photocopied.

All winning entries will be published in the newsletter, and should be 250 words or considerably less.

DEADLINE: February 15, 1985

Send your entries to:

NYCWP COMPETITION #1  
New York City Writing Project  
Herbert H. Lehman College  
Bronx, N.Y. 10468

## Project Notes

A NYCWP member and teacher-consultant since 1978, Barbara Gurr last term became chairperson of the English department at Grover Cleveland High School in Queens. Barbara is energized by the challenges of her new job. "It's a chance to see ideas come to fruition," she said, "to brainstorm and see the creativity of others come to life."

"It's exciting to see teachers feel satisfied with lessons they've done," she continued, "and to engage with them in philosophical and pedagogical give-and-take."

Barbara still enjoys teaching. "I'm having a good time doing Antigone, which brings to the surface some basic truths and invites the kids to examine their values."

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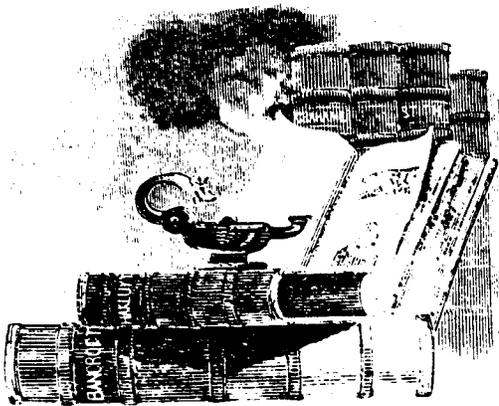
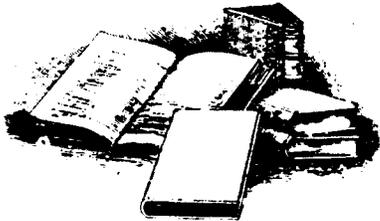
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\* \* \*

The group has seen presentations on prewriting, journals, and writing from photographs, and teachers are trying many of the techniques in their classes.

Robin Cohen  
M.L. King HS  
Melanie Hammer  
Morris HS



## Call For Manuscripts

In The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, -- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Written in 1903, DuBois's description outlines an inescapable reality: racism. What experiences have we, as teachers, had with racism in the school system? How are we using writing in our classes to address the issue of racism? We think these are questions worth posing, and worth writing about. We'd like to devote the next issue of the newsletter to this particular theme. Send your typed manuscripts to:

NEW YORK CITY WRITING PROJECT  
NEWSLETTER  
Herbert H. Lehman College  
Bronx, NY 10468

