

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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A Note From the Editors

Change. We've focused on change as an ever-evolving process here at The New York City Writing Project. Infusing teachers and students with new ideas about teaching and learning (and, by extension, reshaping the structure of our classrooms and, ultimately, our schools) has been at the core of our evolution. But what exactly constitutes change? Need it be on a grand scale or will less dramatic changes suffice?

In our last issue, the Newsletter examined some programs that have worked within the present school structure to effect change. In this issue we venture one step further by examining how some programs which have sought change have fared since their introduction to schools and the people who compose them. We look critically at much of what has transpired since the inception of ideas meant to bring change without losing sight of the small things that are important changes as well. Excerpts from Sondra Perl's report on The Writing Teachers Consortium question the long-term effectiveness of the program in its

present form while Christine Cziko writes about the writing committee initiated by a group of teachers at Evander Childs High School in the wake of the WTC. Lynn Yellen discusses challenges to change within her classes while struggling within a system that seems ever-resistant to change. Inspired by the Summer Institute, Leonard van de Graaff shares some teacher journal entries. Marife Ramos' experience as a first year teacher who participated in the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project documents how her work and expectations were enhanced by her participation in the project. And Mickey Bolmer reflects on hard work for change that didn't result in long-term success at Erasmus High School.

Our other regular features include Project Notes, and more ideas to "steal." We're also featuring a sampling of poems by Dora Alabama (Elaine Avidon) which definitely illustrate that change is present, even in poetry.

As always, we thank those who contributed and look forward to hearing from more of you. Drop us a line, an article or an idea for a future issue!

Working For Change

Last year Sondra Perl agreed to help the Writing Teachers Consortium reflect on its work. From September through June, she spent roughly one day a week observing Barbara Martz, an on-site teacher-consultant for the WTC, as she talked with teachers, worked with students and co-taught inservice courses; she also attended Friday consultants' meetings, during which Barbara and her colleagues—Ed Osterman, Thomasina LaGuardia, Helen Ogden, Candy Systra, Martha Sussman and Lydia Page—discussed their hopes, frustrations, successes, challenges and difficulties. As they looked, together, at the work of the WTC, Sondra and the consultants found much to celebrate—and much to question. In the following excerpts from her report on the year-long study, Sondra records complexities, notes contradictions and asks, "If we were to achieve real change, what would it look like?"

Hopes, Successes, Frustrations

If teachers value the courses and the learning that occurs in them, we think, they will naturally want to bring the same sort of experiences back to their class-

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Profile of a Writing Committee

In the past few years, NYCWP teachers at Newtown, James Madison, Bayside and Evander Childs High Schools have formed and shaped their own writing committees. Christine Cziko, who has taught English at Evander for ten years, has come to think that such committees "are our future." In the following article, she explains why.

A NYCWP summer institute or course often changes the way we think about ourselves, our teaching and our classrooms. After spending just a few weeks with other teachers in a community of writers and learners — sharing our concerns, questions and knowledge — we find it difficult to return to the professional isolation we are used to. Even for those lucky enough to have ongoing courses in their schools, what happens

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rooms and offer them to their students....

We are still surprised that many don't.

Some, of course, do what we hope they will do. When our course is congruent with teachers' own already existing philosophy of teaching, they often feel confirmed in their own work and encouraged to do more. When they are struggling to form some sort of teaching philosophy and our course helps them understand why they are struggling, they feel encouraged to explore further.

Still — Most teachers continue to position themselves almost exclusively in the front of the room, do most of the talking ... and their questions assume ... one right answer [which] it is the students' job to discover.

Goals Met — and Not Met

Teachers are pleased with our courses and many sign up for more; school administrators invite the On-Site Teaching Consultants to work with teachers; superintendents are aware of our presence in the schools; the Board of Education sees us as one of its premier projects.

[The] goal ... to enable teachers to put into practice the principles and procedures of the NYCWP ... is being met in a number of ways. Many teachers ... return to their classes and generally include all or some of the following:

- incorporating more writing in the classrooms (e.g., ... freewriting, journals, and logs ... drafting and revision;
- using writing to learn, not just as a test or a report of what has been learned;
- broadening the audience for writing [to] include peers, others in the school and the community as well as the traditional audience, the teacher;

- inviting and accepting different genres for writing;
- publishing student writing.

But frequently teachers do not grasp what we are trying to do; they reject it, misunderstand it, or see only the practice and not the theory it is based on. They see ... only the features and not the underlying framework.

Speculations

Sometimes this misperception is the fault of presentations. Too often presentations present techniques without making the thinking that underlies them explicit. Sometimes ... presentations are nothing more than techniques. At other times, curriculum-projects may be at fault. For curriculum projects, useful as they are, also ask teachers to implement techniques. And if we use approaches that ask for bits and pieces, why should we expect to get wholes in return? Finally, it may be that an attitude that has slowly, over the years, crept into our work, an attitude of being pleased when teachers try even the smallest bit, now works against us.

Challenges and Difficulties

It may be difficult to introduce change into any large, established system.... Perhaps the current educational system is too overwhelmed by social problems to pay much attention to teaching. Perhaps it is inherently opposed to what we see as crucial to enabling learning. Or perhaps change is possible but only at a very slow pace. In any case, it may be useful to note the obstacles we come up against when we try to bring this work to the schools.

— When the [social] problems (safety, drug abuse, truancy, etc.) ... are so burdensome that administrators are forced to pay daily attention to issues of survival, it is naive to expect them to

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Articles, Letters, Inquiries

We want you to write for the newsletter.
We are always interested in responses, ideas, new voices,
articles, poems, questions.

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devote a great deal of time to promoting effective teaching.

— a hierarchical structure in the schools ... stifles creativity in teachers; it is short-sighted to fault teachers for doing the same with students.

— the physical structure ... where control and regimentation are emphasized, from guards, hall passes, patrols, nailed-down desks and chairs, bells, [makes] flexibility, innovation, collaboration, or change of almost any sort ... incongruous.

— traditional assumptions about teaching which require ... an AIM ... and all learning be directed at achieving the AIM.

— deep-seated and deeply held convictions of teachers, APs and principals ... with disparate and often privately-held philosophies.

Possible Solutions

[We] need to do some work ourselves, raising and examining critically such questions as: What is the nature of learning? What is the nature of texts? And what is the nature of teaching and schooling? And further, are the schools as currently constituted enabling or disabling of learning as we define it? And then to consider what sorts of collaborative efforts might lead us to challenge productively such an imposing system. Such an inquiry may lead us in many possible directions: to clarify our goals; to rethink and revise our courses; to redesign the WTC so that experiments in school structure and organization become possible; to find ways of building strong alliances with school administrators so that they are enabled to support, willingly and openly, the kinds of innovations we suggest; to strengthen the connections among the ILS, the Board of Ed and specific schools so that even greater collaboration can take place.

We may:

— redesign our courses to convey clearly and explicitly a philosophy of pedagogy, not just specific practices and techniques;

— devise ways to enable teachers to construct their own philosophies of teaching so that their own lessons become more thoughtful, more student-centered and more able to foster shared inquiry;

— encourage teachers to experiment ... so that our courses become a forum in which they can reflect with others on the changes they are already making.

Assumptions

Three notions that have always been implicit in the work of the Project:

— that learning is collaborative and social;

— that texts are malleable, that one text can "talk to" another text and that it is the reader who constructs the meaning between texts;

— that teachers are, in large part, facilitators or coaches, who are learning along with students and who can offer their experience as learners to help guide their students.

Hopes

In settings where teachers grasp these points, it is likely that we would see teachers attempting some of the following:

— experimenting with alternate forms of authority; encouraging different groupings of students in their classrooms; inviting students to work along with them in establishing the agenda and negotiating the work; building classroom lessons from the responses and questions students have concerning the subject matter they are studying;

— discussing texts with an eye to differing interpretations and with an invitation clearly extended to students to share their interpretations of texts so that the class as a community can participate in the reading; and

— working side by side with students, sharing their own understanding and using it as a guide.

What Enables Change

If we ask, what enables such changes to take place, many of the features of the WTC come immediately to mind and these features are enormously important in achieving the considerable success of the program:

— an inservice course in the school to introduce both new and experienced teachers to the principles and practices of the program;

— an on-site teacher-consultant to demonstrate for teachers how to implement lessons that include writing and to work with those teachers on an ongoing basis so that their questions and concerns can be addressed;

— building a community of teachers in each school who are committed to this work in order to combat isolation and to provide a source of mutual support and energy.

The Future

The WTC and its staff are at a crossroads. The OTCs can continue along, doing what they are quite proficient at, continuing to replicate the pro-gram at different sites.... Given such a future, it is likely that the program would continue to enjoy the success and the fine reputation it now has.

Or the OTCs, and by the extension the Writing Project and the Institute, can take on some newer and harder challenges. We can take on, overtly, the hard work of affecting not only teachers' practices but also teachers' philosophies ... not only about writing but also directly about teaching.

The point here is this: if we want to change teaching, to make it more collaborative and student-centered, if we want to make students' voices and students' texts a more consistent center of classroom life, if we want to extend the model we bring from teaching writing to changing teaching, if the teaching model we hold dear is inquiry-based, and if in our view the knowledge in classrooms can be constructed by students and teachers together, then we need to rethink how we package what we are doing. What are we willing to say and do? Where do we begin?

—Sondra Perl
Lehman College

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when the courses end? How can we find and maintain, in our schools, communities that will support the teaching we believe in?

For the last two years teachers at Evander Childs HS have been working to maintain one such community. After three years of WTC courses at Evander almost 50 teachers had been involved with the Writing Project. In the fall of 1989 a letter went out inviting these teachers to join the Evander Writing Committee (EWC), a group that would meet after school for ten two-hour sessions each term. The WTC provided a modest stipend for the participants. We would define our own purpose, goals and activities.

From a Course to a Committee

A dozen teachers showed up for that first meeting, none of us sure about what we would be doing. Participating in a course is simple: you sit back or lean forward, but basically leave it up to the co-ordinators to shape the experience. Though two of us in the committee were experienced teacher consultants, we had to find a way to provide leadership without becoming "the leaders." Our first session was a crucial one: the group had to identify some authentic needs and propose ways that the committee could help meet those needs; otherwise there was no compelling reason for us to exist.

We began by writing three times on the same basic question: What kinds of support do you want *in your classroom* to help you continue to teach according to your beliefs? What kinds of support do you want *in your department*? What kinds of support do you want *in this school*? We came up with long lists of things that people wanted to see happen as well as things that got in the way of our being the teachers we wanted to be. Of course we saw right away that there were many issues that a writing committee couldn't help us with, from oversized classes to lack of supplies and desks bolted to the floor. But there were many other things that we could try, collectively, to change.

A few major concerns emerged, chief among them the battle against isolation. We felt isolated from each other, with "shop talk" looked down upon in most teacher gathering-places and time to talk with colleagues limited. We felt professionally isolated — cut off from current thinking in education, new ideas, books, articles. We also wanted to connect the work of the committee directly to students in some public way: to sponsor some student activities, encourage student writing, have a real presence in the school. We didn't want to be a closed group just talking to each other.

These concerns shaped how we spent our time together and what activities we planned. Each session began with refreshments (of course!) and extended teacher-talk — lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. We found this time invaluable. We used it in many different ways: to proudly describe great moments and share our students' writing; to complain and ask for help with tough classes; to share lesson plans, videotapes, anything that

worked for us; even to try out, on the group, activities we were thinking of using in our classrooms.

We fought professional isolation by informally sharing interesting articles and, more formally, by choosing books to read together. Our first choice was *The Journal Book*, edited by Toby Fulwiler. We devised a way to use the book during our sessions without requiring everyone to read every article. Teachers paired up; each pair chose an article to present to the group. The presentations were varied, the discussions that followed them interesting and based on real classroom practice. Teachers often brought in samples of student writing generated in response to ideas we had read or talked about.

As a school activity, the Writing Committee sponsored a student writing contest. The idea was to get students writing. Competition was downplayed by awarding all participants certificates and providing many prizes — including one given to a person whose name was pulled from a random drawing of entries. We had our own award assembly, and a plaque engraved with the winners' names was mounted in the school lobby.

Impact in Our School

Over the past two years our committee has grown to 18 teachers of English, social studies, special ed. and ESL. We have opened up the committee to new teachers who have not participated in Writing Project courses. Though initially these teachers

The greatest impact has been on our own teaching — what we're willing to try, the risks we take, the work we put in. We dare more because we have a community that supports our efforts.

don't share our common experiences with writing process ideas and techniques, they quickly pick up on what they see us doing, and we are constantly teaching each other.

The Writing Committee's greatest impact has been on our own teaching — what we're willing to try, the risks we take, the work we put in. We dare more because we have a community that supports our efforts. When you're all alone, being told you're idealistic, naive or crazy is depressing. When you're with a group of like-minded people you can talk to every day, your commitment is renewed.

One day we wrote about our work.

"I've kept coming to the Writing Committee because of the support I get from my colleagues, the new ideas I get to explore and the general good feelings I have when I leave," wrote Claudette Green.

I feel we have a wonderful group of people who are not afraid to take risks and who are agreeable and supportive of each

other which is rare with everyone being so busy. We've also shared our triumphs as well as our failures. Everyone is treated equally and encouraged to participate.

Others agreed:

I feel that the Writing Committee brings enrichment to my teaching. It reminds me of why I decided to teach. It must continue especially to keep innovative minds alive.

— Monica A. Cover

Why I keep coming back? I like it. I like to sit with my peers. I like to unwind with adults after a day of teaching. Instead of complaining about the life of a teacher, the people here make me feel good about my profession by their professionalism and concern for their students.

— Fran Oz

I enjoy this group because it is the closest thing to a support group I've ever joined. We don't just talk, gossip and complain (important and fun sometimes); we also deal with genuine problems and questions in education. The fact that each person is willing to discuss and attack the problems of teaching is exciting for me. I like discussing education - not theories on education, but education itself.

I hope this won't end while I'm teaching.

— Joe Bellacero

I believe we are also beginning to have some impact beyond ourselves. With eight English teachers on the committee the tone of English department meetings has shifted slightly. Cynical talk about students' abilities, workbook drills to teach writing or proposals for endless lists of spelling and vocabulary words are quickly challenged by eight raised hands rather than one or two. "Old-timers" who have steered clear of Writing Project courses are asking us questions, wondering if we're on to something.

Our impact is much harder to detect in the school at large. With almost three hundred teachers in the building, we know we're very small. But at least we're there as an alternative to the cynicism and low morale that many teachers fall prey to. Teachers looking for something different can find us.

Toward a Model of Self-Sustained Staff Development

As a city-wide writing project I think we should make on-site writing committees our goal — I think they are our future. Writing committees grow as teachers grow, in response to teachers' needs and wishes. If we see staff development as more than a brief interlude in a teacher's career — if we see it, instead, as a continuing process of renewal and commitment — then we need to find ways of supporting teachers as they shape their own communities of learners. At Evander we've made a start.

—Christine Cziko
Evander Childs HS

Getting the Bends in Third Period

To focus on teacher education while taking for granted the unchangeability of the other variables [such as class size, rigid schedules, and centralized testing] is tantamount to placing teachers in strait jackets, dangling them upside down underwater, and demanding that they demonstrate the backstroke.

—Mark A. Clarke, "Negotiating Agendas"
Language Arts, 66 (1989), 379-379.

This is the story of my third period class, and my struggle to teach them well. It is not an entirely happy story, but it is an important one for the lessons it illustrates.

The code of the class is H4-07, which means that it is section seven of Global History IV, a one-semester course that I teach to three different classes each day. In my school, this course is taught sixteen times a day. It is difficult to appreciate how one Global IV class can differ from the next unless you see them in action. The students in all sixteen sections are predominantly tenth graders, although certainly each class contains a handful of students who are repeating the course for the second or even the third time. Still, these are mostly fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, with all of their wit, intelligence, insecurity, cruelty, bouts of laziness, and genius.

So why is third period so different from first period and eighth period? I ask myself this question each day. It's ironic: first and eighth periods—eighth being the last class of the day for most students—seem to promise sleepiness and low energy. Instead, my first period is the most productive and my eighth-period class the most energetic. But third period bores me. They greet each activity and all reading material with groans, complaints, or total apathy. The eight or nine students who actually like the material are dogged into shameful silence by the pervasive negativity. I go in cheerful (less so recently), determined, firm, and reasonably well-prepared every day. I come out dashed, at least temporarily. Each day I remind myself that fourth period is the reward for third period. My fourth period class is a dynamic, overcrowded class of eleventh grade American history students who are, by and large, eager to learn and fun to be with.

What's happening, I wonder. How can I fix it? All of the things that work the rest of the day do not work during third period. The students do not enjoy themselves and many shut down completely. I languish in their hostility. I know that this class is my responsibility. I am prepared to accept that responsibility without necessarily accepting blame. I ask them to write

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Third Period . . . *continued from previous page*

about the class—to make lists of what's good about class and what's bad about it. As I type the lists into my computer, I take it all very personally. I ask my husband, Did you know I am the most boring teacher on earth? But when I stand in front of my students the next day, I am not wounded. I am surprised at my own sincerity when I tell them that I can take constructive criticism and that I do not take their comments personally.

They are angry about their term projects. The projects are too complicated and require too much library time, they tell me. They are running into problems because budget cuts have reduced library hours and have prevented libraries from maintaining microfilm equipment, which they need for their research. They complain about the curriculum, with its emphasis on European events. They are bored, they tell me. They seem to agree that I am very nice. Nice, I think. Isn't that what they used to say about unattractive girls? I will always regard that as the lowest compliment, and I am relieved that some of my students have chosen more meaningful adjectives.

I am struck by the combination of their complaints. I share their contempt for the Eurocentric curriculum and the state tests at the end, which are graduation requirements. I designed their projects so that they could choose any global issue that interested them and pursue it. I made it a significant part of their grade and have devoted large amounts of class time to working with them on the project so that we could counterbalance all of the European wars and political history with things that matter to them.

I am amused at the ranting, initiated by one very disgruntled student, that she is "sick of Hitler." I devoted four lessons to Hitler and the Holocaust—a department low, for which I was criticized. I did, however, invite a Holocaust survivor to speak to the students and answer their questions. Kristal, one of my students, was sick of Hitler before she met me, and is convinced of a Jewish teachers' conspiracy to teach only about their own oppression. Kristal is surprised that I have also invited a member of the African National Congress to speak to them.

We have it out. Kristal is also angry because of her perception that I fail students for being late to class. She has calculated her own grade for each of the first two marking periods and knows that, at most, only ten points of her grade can be lost for poor attendance and lateness. I remind her of this. It turns out that what angers her is that I mark her late although she is not very late. It is becoming personal, and I am concerned about this. It disturbs me that Kristal and her friend Shenean believe that I am persecuting them. I ask the other students to comment, because I need to get out of the fray. Do they feel it would be better for me to wait five minutes before taking attendance? Do they feel that other students' lateness affects them as a class? I find some support among the students for the school policy, which is a great relief, since sooner or later, I must remind Kristal and Shenean that I would lose my job if I allowed my students to hang out in the hall for the first five minutes of class,

not to mention the waste of their education.

We talk about social needs. It's true: these students don't get a break. They hustle (more or less) from one class to the next, for eight or nine consecutive periods, divided by four-minute passing intervals. It is a large school, with shadowy halls and poor ventilation. The windows are just below the ceiling, so that we can barely see the sky and cannot see the street at all. These students get little time to talk to friends, since lunch is about forty minutes long, and some students have no lunch period. I understand. My needs are not met either. I cannot easily be reached by telephone at work, and my access to a private phone is severely limited. I confer with students and other teachers in a crowded office, or in the corridors. For privacy, we talk in the book room. Like my students, I shuttle between rooms, weighted down by books. And like them, I have other people in my face all day.

I listen to their woes, and I empathize with them. I do not give them the teacher's point of view, but tell them instead of the humane, suburban high school that I attended. We had a commons, a sort of student recreation room, and we had about three periods each week when we could choose to go there in lieu of study hall. My students do not know what a study hall is, and I explain. I also try to show them my efforts to meet their social needs. We work in small groups with some frequency, and large-group discussions are a regular feature. I often have them choose partners to work on writing assignments. I marvel at students who choose to work alone, but I don't require them to work together all the time.

We have cleared the air a little. I am not sure that I can give them what they want if what they want is to have nothing expected of them. We return to the subject of research projects. I have mentally prepared myself for this. I tell them the truth—that had I realized the extent to which budget cuts had ravaged the public libraries, I would not have assigned such a project. I remind them, however, that their research was designed as newspaper research. Many of them have not even started with a current news article, much less looked at microfilm. They ask, couldn't they use books instead. What about magazines? Could the project be done entirely with current articles? Yes, yes, yes. They are angry now. Why hadn't I told them this? I stamp my feet. I say, pointing at my feet, *this* is what you do! You stamp your feet. But there are already people in this room who have decided to use only magazine articles. It's fine. It's your project. Why didn't you say you wanted to use magazines? I point to the list of goods and bads. I have it on good authority that I am not that hard to talk to. I smile at them.

There is a kind of embarrassment that washes over more than a few faces. I feel strange. I do not want them to feel shame. But I do want them to get on with their work. Will they? I wonder. I too feel shame. I am ashamed to teach in a room that is sometimes ankle deep in trash. The loudspeaker does not work, so we can't hear announcements or bells. The door handle is difficult to turn, and has fallen off twice this term. The corner of the room is messy with papers, stray books, and trash. I hear mice running

under the cabinet. There are cigarette ashes and coffee stains on the teacher's desk. I teach in a disgusting place. I teach in this filthy room three periods out of eight. The other teachers who use the room do not erase the blackboard or discard their coffee cups. They smoke in the classroom during the one period when the room is empty. Their students' materials are left on the desks and litter the floors. As I move between the groups of students at work, I stoop to pick up gum wrappers and crumpled worksheets.

I know that these problems are bigger than me and my third period class. I try to distance myself from all of the pain in this room, including my own. I remember that I swim backstroke in a strait jacket three or four times a day. It's not my fault that I drown once or twice a day. Intellectually, I am convinced. I am vindicated. Emotionally, I sink, gurgling and choking, wishing I had done more.

Mark Clarke, from whom I have borrowed this metaphor, understands my fate well. He has defined the *real curriculum* as "what happens in the classroom, the creative clash of conversation and ideas" (p. 375). It can be planned, but only to an extent. The teacher cannot control it because he or she is only one part of the system. In my quest for an increasingly open classroom, I have had to recognize the great power that my students have gained. In some classes, the students master that power and in others they abuse it. A few ignore it. This is what is happening in my third period class. Jennifer understands this. She is angry because she feels that students are blaming me for their boredom and their failure. During the two-day discussion of how things are going, Jennifer compared the class to the fall term. She had been in one of my Global III classes, in a group of students which was extraordinarily warm-hearted and productive. The chemistry was so good in that class that I often described it as being more fun than lunch. Jennifer's comment was that last term, students participated and got excited about the work. She is frustrated because she understands that I cannot fix third period for them.

Several months ago the chairman of my department observed my third period class and was outraged that I was not doing more to make Leonard and Pedro pay more attention to me and my lesson. He was irritated that Pedro and Leonard had inched their chairs backward so that they could lean against the back wall of the classroom. He felt that they were symbolically leaving the room by locating their chairs against the wall. Foolishly, I laughed out loud at this analysis. I explained that their choice of seats and even the way they had situated their chairs was a natural behavior for two generally shy people. I pointed out the Pedro and Leonard were successful students. They attended regularly, were attentive, participated in activities, and appeared to me to be learning. The written observation report of this lesson detailed my poor classroom management skills.

Last week, I returned a test to my third period class. As always, I posted a chart to show the distribution of grades. One

student had scored over 100. (There was extra credit.) Someone wanted to know who got the high grade. They looked at Charlotte, who regularly scores well. But it wasn't Charlotte. They looked at me expectantly. I said that I don't tell people's grades, so it was up to the student to reveal himself. Leonard could not contain a beaming smile. He nodded his head. Leonard wants you to know it was him, I said. He was proud. Would he learn more in the front of the room, sitting up straight, under my watchful eye?

My third period class will not become a great place to be before the end of the semester. It is not within my power to make it so. I could make the class conform more closely to the expectations of my chairman, but I won't. It belongs to Leonard and Pedro and Charlotte and Jennifer and Kristal and Shenean and me. It is a disappointment to most of us, but it is ours to fix or live with. Kristal is holding her breath until she turns blue. She will probably fail, along with ten or fifteen of her classmates. Jennifer is flailing her arms. She will earn her high grade, but will not have much fun doing it. Leonard is learning to breathe under water. I've got the bends.

—Lynn Yellen
Murry Bergtraum HS

From a Teacher's Journal

Leonard van de Graaff teaches English at Jane Addams Vocational HS in the South Bronx. Last summer he participated in a Writing Project's Summer Institute at Lehman College. Here are some excerpts from his teaching journal.

8/28/91

I had a dream about teaching the other night: this is the dream. I am in class with students in moveable desks. I try to circle them around in the room, but we keep not getting the circle right. Soon, I've lost control of the class and some of the students have separated from others in the room. I keep trying to remind them about something I want. I decide in the dream that if I speak calmly they will hear me and listen to me. One thing stands out to me about this dream—the sense that the students have other activities they are interested in. It is difficult to communicate with them in a way that gets their attention.

9/13/91

Standing looking at my period 5 English class watching the students organize their questions for their interviews of each other. They are really concentrating—they want to get all that information in a specific order. Decisions are being made about which questions they like. Pages are being crumpled up. Some students are adding their own questions. They squint at the board to see all the questions. Complete silence. Carefully, I feel proud and happy doing this. Knock on wood I think to myself, superstitious that last year will suddenly begin to happen again if I think about it too much. A

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Journal . . . *continued from previous page*

student sneezes — five voices quietly say, “Bless you,” and then the sneezer says, “Thanks.” Where are all the stereotypes about how hard “this kind of student” is to control. How about the thing I hear said all the time about how they have no values and no respect for each other.

9/15/91

As I read their letters, I realize how much more I know about the students than other teachers. Little hints they give me about themselves — characteristics they reveal to me. Gwendolyn who thinks about what goes on in the world around her. Jasman who sounds like he leads a wild life out on the streets at night. Is he telling the truth, and if he is, is that why he looks tired? Hattie whose life seems to be basically happy and who is coming to school alone on a subway for the first time. . . . As they wrote their biographies today, I noticed how much they looked like the teachers in the WTC course this summer. They crossed out as they wrote, crumpled up sheets of paper and stopped to find the right words. I feel so excited by the process of writing and reading and the possibilities for them. Before I took the WTC, I felt hopeless in my effort to make them decent writers. It’s not that I wasn’t already trying some of the techniques we worked with this summer, but I hadn’t worked with those techniques myself. I watch their process of writing now and see my job as building on what is already there, not filling up furiously the holes in their knowledge, education and intelligence with reams of worksheets and lists. I’m tired of people telling me that they like to encourage students’ creativity and then they go ahead and smother them with remediation.

9-28-91

Well, one thing that hasn’t worked yet is my entire eighth period class. They are a large honors group and they’re out of control. I decided I needed/wanted/desired strongly moveable desks for at least some of my classes. So they gave me what is basically a closet with 20 desks in it for my class of 30 (almost all of whom show up everyday). The first day I stole 5 desks from across the hall, and some students sat on stools. We are crammed into the room which has been built, in a rare feat of design work, so you can hear the class next door more clearly than you can hear your own class. The students keep asking me why we moved (a picture flashes through my mind of all of them in perfect rows in our old room, neatly spaced, matched exactly with the pattern of my Delaney book, looking forward at me, attentive).

Why did we move? I answer them and soon the explanation becomes a joke running around the room, one student explaining to another, “He wants us to be able to see each other.” They don’t know what to make of it; they have to breathe in unison we’re so tightly squeezed in and I want them to look at each other. It’s not quite a circle either; it’s more of a rhombus shape we’re in and they have taken advantage of the fact that they can see each other to make faces at each other and generally to be a pain. Next week my project is to create a sense of a whole class with them.

9-29-91

How my students respond to lessons is the lesson...I can’t relate to it like a defined shape they must fit into — a shape with x, y and z that happens so that by the end of the lesson they understand x, y and z. That is what principals and assistant principals often look for in teacher’s lesson. They look for that structure that will be imposed on the students. The best way I have found to think about this at the moment is by relating it to what Jane Juska talked about in her article “Observations.” The A.P. came into her class and looked for “The Motivation,” the This, the That in her lesson—whatever had made it into the mainstream educational vocabulary at that time. Meanwhile, what Jane Juska said is that the A.P. couldn’t see the process that she and her students were involved in — the A.P. caught them in mid-stream, so to speak. She had them involved in something with goals and a structure, but those things could be recognized in the lesson only if you already knew about them. This would have been possible if her A.P. had discussed with her beforehand what she had been working on in general with her class. I know my A.P. has no idea what I think or feel or have perceived about my students. I’m not even sure I could explain it in a way she would believe or trust. Of course, I should initiate such a conversation, but, quite honestly, I dread it.

10-3-91

The concept that is difficult for me to remember is that I can’t teach everything at once. I really do have to be patient. Eventually, I hope they will get into reading and writing. It may take me a while, but after a semester I think they will become better, more thoughtful writers. That is my goal, and I should always remember that. It does take a while to develop those habits with regards to writing. They need to learn to lean on writing as a way of saying things they otherwise wouldn’t say. I want to help them discover it and uncover their own inner writing voice. So right now, I need to look at my classes for what is working, as well as what is not working. Otherwise, I will simply feel overwhelmed and swamped. It’s more than that, also. I need to look at them as people with all the same issues as I have about writing. They get easily frustrated with it and in their case, they are especially unused to sitting down with it and being satisfied with it. It is something they have been forced to do and which in the past has led to red marks and boringness—that syndrome that haunts their entire educational career.

10-4-91

It is absolutely quiet and people are concentrating on what they are trying to say. Michael just read me his story and he said the writing wasn’t well expressed and that he wasn’t happy with what he wrote. I read it and it was clear but I know how he feels because that is very much how I feel when I write something. I am pleased that they are putting thought and effort into what they’re writing. I think this stems partially from the fact that they care about the topics they picked and they are completely invested in what they are saying. It comes out of a personal inner voice, not out of what I expect.

10-21-91

In period 9 freewriting has turned out to be a good way of

having them read their work and challenge themselves as writers. Several students often volunteer to read and other students are listening when they do that. That gives me a lot of pleasure— hearing students read their work out loud. Instantly silence falls (most of the time) and the students are interested in what the student reading has written.

Today, I had a chance to comment on what Jessica wrote in that class. She had traveled all over the place in her writing. As I write this I see how important this journal is to keep making the connections between my ideas and what I notice and what really goes on in the classroom.

There are so many positive moments. The dream Tyrone described in his freewriting, the students who tell me to wait for them because they are still writing...

10-28-91

Today went very well in my period 5 class. I tried several things today. First of all, I decided to start the unit on culture and background with them first, before my other classes. That way I have something to compare my other classes to tomorrow and I also got a run through of the lesson. By doing this, I allowed myself a breather after doing a particular lesson and time to think in more detail about what I could have done differently and what worked without having all my classes blurring together.

Anyway, in period 5 we had a nice discussion about people's heritage. Charlene talked at great length about down South, which her grandparents told her about. She told us about the switch teachers used, how they washed everything by hand, how they had to be careful about snakes. Shameka and several other students agreed with this and added to it. Jackie said that she thought things must have been harder back then and Raymer chimed in that it was because they didn't have technology. Most people agreed that we have it easier now. Several people said that they came here for a better life. In period 9 there was an interesting conversation between Oliveen, who is from Jamaica, and Jessica, who is from Puerto Rico. Oliveen couldn't understand why they call them plantanos when what they are is plantains. Felicita talked about the large cockroaches in Puerto Rico and the different water filtration system they have there. "On your marks, get set, FREEWRITE!" I can't believe I've resorted to this sports mentality to get my period 8 class going, but it is a real benefit to see how creative they get when freewriting — great sentences, funny sentences...they are no longer frustrated and tired. Somehow, school seems to drain more from them than it gives a lot of the time. In their freewriting, you hear their real voices, restored and free. I sit at the computer thinking about the semester. Where am I now? One thing about keeping this journal is that it has allowed me to remain aware of how I am progressing as a teacher. Without the journal it would be easy to forget the small but essential and irreversible successes I have had in class — the almost imperceptible change in students' writing, the way they have come to feel comfortable reading their work out loud, the way they have become used to my strange instructions and how they jump at the opportunity to write (sometimes).

—Leonard Van de Graaff
Jane Addams Vocational HS

It Doesn't Take a Veteran Teacher

In the fall of 1990, Marife Ramos participated in the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project's Basic Course. A first year teacher, Marife decided to put her Writing Project "lessons" to work immediately and chose one of her seventh grade social studies classes at JHS 210 in Ozone Park, Queens as her "case study". Marife continued to take courses (the Advanced Basic and the Advanced Summer Institute) while she put aside "traditional" assumptions about learning so she could experiment with writing in her classes. What follows are the results of her experimentation including her commentary and student samples. Marife, by the way, is now in her second year at JHS 210 and is taking the Writing on the Computer course this semester.

It doesn't take a veteran teacher to diagnose that one of the leading causes of low motivation in students is BOREDOM. We try everything we can to avoid boring our classes to death. As a first year teacher of seventh graders, my original aim was to be enthusiastic about Social Studies so that my "audience" would likewise be interested. I tried to develop techniques which would elicit constant participation from the children. Nobody looks forward to a forty-minute lecture, so I designed lessons in which the class answered all the questions and discussed the Whys, the Hows, and the Whos of American History. Question-answer sessions, however, weren't enough to maintain students' interest. I looked desperately for activities outside of the text, for activities that would encourage them to be genuinely involved with their work. I wanted them to become connected to History, to individualize Social Studies—in short, to become entwined and personal with the research.

The Writing and Learning Project provided assignments which combined knowledge with active interaction and independence of thought. The writing process ideas hit me like a ton of chalk. These writing projects aren't the traditional, boring papers required of all students. I stayed away from the drudgery of the current events article, the long essay, the painful composition, the plagiarized research paper, and reams of reports, reports, reports. . . . Let's face it: Children aren't the only ones who let out a yawn when reading a careful compilation of the 1989 editions of *Worldbook* and *Britannica*.

It was not until I took the Writing Project course that I discovered that writing need not be a tedious and teeth-pulling experience for young scholars. Writing can and should be a creative process. It is an adventure of the imagination. Most kids are afraid to write because they view writing as restrictive drill. I want my students to perceive the pen as an outlet through which their deeper thoughts may escape. This case study describes the year-long process I underwent to accomplish that goal.

ABRACADABRA! From dialogues to diaries, from poetry

Please see Teacher, next page . . .

Teacher. . . . *continued from previous page*

to process writing, the thirty-six students in Class 7-205 learned to use writing as a vehicle toward a deeper sense of self-understanding and a closer look at their values and beliefs. Writing assignments inspired by my participation in the Writing and Learning course encouraged the writers to be introspective and to believe that their ideas were valuable and meaningful. As their self-esteem was enhanced along with their skill in interpreting history, students gained greater mastery of course material.

Journals and Point of View Writing

From the months of September to November, the class examined the many reasons Europeans came to settle in the New World. We met courageous religious freedom fighters such as Lord Baltimore and Anne Hutchinson, and brave explorers such as Ponce de Leon and Magellan. The culminating activity was an elaborate journal of a colonial character of the child's choosing. Each diary demanded specific information—for example, the events which occurred in the making of the Mayflower Compact, or the defense attorney's statements in the Salem Witch Trials, or the friendly compromises between the settlers and Massasoit during the first Thanksgiving. I encouraged those who drew better than they wrote to include exploration maps, navigational plans, and scenes from their village.

A journal presents a careful compilation of research and prevents regurgitation of the encyclopedia. I was struck by the range of creativity and roles the children chose to reenact. I learned and listened to the voices of Pilgrim sailors, determined sheriffs at the Witch Trials in the Puritan Commonwealth, a distressed mother accused of witchcraft by her son. I heard journals of Roger Williams, Christopher Columbus, and a broken-hearted slave who was abducted in the 1620's from her African village. One particular entry demonstrated the children's grasp of the different lifestyles of the original thirteen colonies:

14 October 1682

Dear Diary,

Today my crew and I landed on the shore of the Delaware River. It was the first glance at our new colony. . . . One of our rules and beliefs is not to start a war, so we asked Indians to sell their land to us. At 5:00 in the evening, we set up camp. We had to hunt our food and purify the water of the sea to drink. . . . We had trouble getting food and we knew the squirrel wouldn't feed us all, but it tasted good. Its fur made a good hat for me. The bear was delicious.

William Penn

Pretending to be another person, especially one from three centuries ago, is a complex task for a seventh grader. Yet the students described poignantly the hardships and diseases of the colonies. They comprehended that tragedy hit Sales because enemies wanted "an eye for an eye." Boys assumed the roles of witches and Pilgrim mothers, girls wore Deputy's badges, and thirteen-year-olds recorded the advanced emotions of a dying man on a scaffold:

July 23, 1692

Dear Diary,

During the last two days, I've done a lot of thinking. I can't

think of a logical reason for this charade. I never bothered anyone. I always kept to myself and my family. I am very scared of dying. There are so many things I wish I could do now. To my son, Andrew, I'm sorry about the argument. I still love you—Take care of the family. . . . To my daughter, Sally—be a good girl and help Mom. My beloved wife, Cathy, I love you with all my heart.

John Smith

Journals require focused writings since the students must BE their historic characters. This role-playing exercise allowed the write to think analytically and to interact with the assignment. Diaries proved to be more interesting to write (and to read) than papers, and the intricate colonial tales they wove were personalized creations.

Writing about history in the first person allows for many possibilities beyond the journal. We had finished a chapter covering the mid-1800's, the era of the California Gold Rush and the invention of the telegraph. We began by discussing what types of vocabulary words students find in newspapers and hear from television reporters. Then I distributed the assignment called "California, Here I come!"

One of the people to go to CA was a young writer named Mark Twain.

At the time, he was a newspaper reporter. His job was to send reports about life in California. Imagine you had been a newspaper reporter at this time. Write a news story about one of the topics below:

1. Life on the route to CA
2. Towns stirring in San Francisco
3. Hard life in the gold fields
4. Be a Pony Express Rider
5. An interview with John Sutter or with John Marshall.

Again, the students were enthusiastic about becoming other people:

May 14, 1849

The Rush For Gold

This is Mark Twain reporting here in CA for all of you back East . . . people gave up perfectly good paying, steady jobs (like the one man I met who deserted a \$50.00 per week job to live in a shack here, looking for gold in the hope of getting rich quick).

And then there are the sad stories of families losing their loved ones to pneumonia and influenza. These hard-working people suffered great tragedies to make this long trip West for gold. This is Mark Twain signing off . . . and if you decide to come here, all I can say is "GOOD LUCK."

Dialogue Writing

Classes of all levels enjoy Dialogue Writing. All the teacher need present is a conflict which would elicit a debate or a heated argument between two people. A perfect conflict for our study was: "Who do you believe should own the land—the settlers or the Native Americans? Why?"

In January, my class reviewed both the viewpoints of the settlers and of the Native American tribes. We witnessed the many bloody battles in the Northwest Territory, in the Midwest,

and in the Southwest. We discussed how the Sioux, Seminoles, and Nez Perce were driven out by leaders such as Andrew Jackson and General George Armstrong Custer. We tried to understand the affliction of the Cherokees as they traversed the infamous trek called the "Trail of Tears." We cheered tribal victories at Little Big Horn and were dismayed at the fall of Tecumseh and at the ruthless attack of Wounded Knee. Despite my endeavors to remain impartial, 7-205 vehemently took the side of the Native Americans who "were here first."

In order to broaden their understanding of our study, I asked them to write dialogues. They each chose a partner and sat beside him or her with pens and a sheet of paper. One would be the voice of a settler, and the other would be a Native American. Partners took turns writing down their arguments.

Several people went back and forth without any new ideas developing, and some students retorted, "That's dumb!" without defending their statements with facts. Nevertheless, there were jewels of dialogues which presented critical thought and an involvement in History. Controversies arose which had not come up before in class. To further enrich the exercise, volunteers were asked to actively play out their roles in front of the group. We heard a series of dramas depicting historical struggles.

*Vn = Voice of Native American
Vs = Voice of Settler*

Vn: Nobody should have possession of this land. It is free for all to live on, just the air is free.

Vs: You are wrong! The advanced and civilized should own it.

Vn: We are not stupid, we have learned to read and write our own language. . . .

Vn: Why are you taking our land and killing our people?

Vs: Because you are an inferior race. You use this land for your buffalo hunting when it should be used for farms and building cottages.

Vn: We were here on this land for thousands of years before you white men came. If anybody should get this land, it should be us.

The children who portrayed the white settlers admitted that they understood their points of view better than they had before, but were uncomfortable making such discriminatory remarks. I replied that they should be proud of their dialogues because they exhibited clear concepts of how prejudice played a key role in the settlement of America.

Some children had difficulty responding directly in these controversial dialogues so the class as a whole examined how to use pros and cons to advance an argument. This skill was developed for several months before we attempted dialogue writing again, this time in April.

I deliberately chose the issue of slavery because we were nearing the Civil War Unit. More importantly, I knew slavery would cause intense dialogues because prejudice and racism are

very much alive in this city. The children witness and undergo discrimination on the streets and in the school each day. Furthermore, they are aware and sensitive to the drama still unraveling in South Africa. I made the process clear. "Violence in language is not only unacceptable but an enemy to understanding. We are, however, willing to hear all your ideas. It is imperative that you carefully listen to your partner's viewpoints and opinions." The children explored the reasons why slavery existed for 250 years despite its inherent evil.

Va: Voice against Slavery

Vp: Voice Pro Slavery

Va: Why is there slavery?

Vp: Because it provides cheap labor for work on our large plantations.

Va: But it's a horrible thing being taken away from your family and separated for miles.

Vp: Black people are not people but merchandise. I have white indentured servants, too; it's just that Negroes are easier to spot when they try to escape.

Va: Blacks aren't any different from us. If we cut ourselves, we whites bleed. When a slave cut himself, he also bleeds.

Class 7-205 sympathized with the ordeal of the slaves who were sold as property and auctioned off, never to see their spouses and children again. I believe students enjoy dialogues because they confront each other's individual differences while respecting what others have to say. Thus, partners learned from each other while the teacher observed and listened, instead of the other way around. The class was thrilled to have been given the opportunity to stand in front of the class and act out their dialogues in miniature plays. This was a treat for everybody involved!

Double Entry

Toward the end of the year, I borrowed a collection of slave diaries, Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave*. The entries were moving as they described the unsanitary conditions of the Middle Passage, the sacrifices of slave mothers, the slaves' backbreaking toil in the cotton fields. I chose diary entries which illustrated how overseers whipped slaves already dying of fatigue, how buyers would examine the slaves on the auction block "as though a jockey would examine a horse." My purpose was to encourage heightened emotions and reactions from all the students, even from those reputed to be nonworkers.

The class was directed to fold their papers into three columns labeled 1. Text 2. My Reactions/Feelings 3. Partner's Response. They were free to select any three to five sentences or full passages from the text, and then copy their choices into the first column. They were asked to respond in the second column. In order to help the class with sentence openers, I provided the Project's list of "speculative starters": "I don't understand . . . I am surprised that . . . Although it seems. . ."

Please see Teacher, next page . . .

Teacher . . . continued from previous page

Text

1. *When this was done, two women jumped overboard after their children.*

My Feelings/Reactions

1. Why would women leap overboard to save their drowning children when they were themselves tied up in chains? Certainly they would not stay afloat!

Text

2. *About twenty persons were seized at our village at the time.*

My Feelings/Reactions

2. I was reminded of Hitler; How he seized people to go to war or leave Germany.

Text

3. *Occasionally, a slave owner would try to be gentle with a child.*

My Feelings/Reactions

3. I think there were some kind slaveowners. But how could they purchase anyone? I don't understand . . . Of course, there were owners with hearts, but most didn't know how to use it, or shut their hearts down.

The questions the children asked showed introspection and concentration upon reading a primary source. I was impressed by the student who compared two eras of history, both marked by malicious treatment of a specific race. Other students reacted with confusion and grief, as well as vengeful hatred and anger.

We continued double entry the following day as the students exchanged papers with their assigned partners. The partners reacted to both the first and second columns. The purpose of adding a third column was to foster further interaction and debates between the pairs. 7-205 found this part of the exercise a challenge because they needed to support their arguments against the reactions of their partners. It was necessary for them to refer back to the diaries and communicate productively.

I then asked the students to reflect on the double entry. I found a significant pattern in nineteen out of thirty-six papers—a reaction I did not expect:

I definitely like double entry because I was able to express my feelings freely about slavery. I felt confident because there's no chance for me to be wrong. I felt proud of myself because double entry helps me believe that I know so much more about slaves and how they were treated. I would like to do it again.

I think this exercise helped me feel the pain that most of the slaves went through.

I really enjoyed working with my partner because it gave me a chance to see how he felt about slavery.

A reflection I will always remember is the one from a student who is often in the Dean's Office. His brief letter tells me that freewriting and open expression of feelings in class are strong motivators.

I felt real proud of myself 'cause I thought I put good answers on the double-entry. It's my first time—this exercise made me wonder if I'm able to do things without giving my teachers a hard time. This exercise means a lot to me now. I'm doing things without thinking that I'm a no-good student.

Isn't that what we teachers all strive for? For school to be a truly positive experience? For students to succeed and gain self-esteem, especially those who have only faced failure? For class to be a shelter away from impulsive behavior and anger? Shouldn't all our lessons overlook the students' weaknesses and highlight their many strengths? It's extremely encouraging to find means to teach which let children gain confidence and respond openly because they are not afraid of giving the wrong answer.

My purpose in this case study was to provide a positive learning environment while integrating writing with American History. I do not expect to wave a magic wand and turn my

Traditional teachers should take the risk of putting their textbooks aside. It is painless and worthwhile to transform the classroom into a writing workshop.

thirteen-year-olds into a corps of Walt Whitmans and Harriet Beecher Stowes. The pen, however, does offer many avenues through which the students may adapt their individual learning styles to the subject matter. My goal was to create activities to draw in the unmotivated and the nonworker . . . And this is exactly what occurred.

Through diaries, students became Columbus for a week or warlocks upon the scaffold. The actors in the group rose to glory in dialogues which later progressed into debates. The shy and bashful tore down their walls to convey their feelings to partners in double entry. Some students even wrote poetry inspired by a trip we took together.

Writing dispenses many lessons. Children cannot learn, and should not be expected to learn, without personal investment in a subject. The writing process allows students to write for the sake of LEARNING with pleasure. Traditional teachers should take the risk of putting their textbooks aside. It is painless and worthwhile to transform the classroom into a writing workshop. As the observer in this case study, I obtained results which went beyond my original expectations. I am still a relatively new teacher, but armed with crucial insights on what can motivate junior high school youngsters. The Writing and Learning Project gave me the tools which break down the model of the student as a mere recipient of learning. In writing, students are actors and creators.

—Marife Ramos
JHS 210Q

Learning Change Recursively

Change, for most of us, comes slowly. We try new techniques in our classrooms, discuss them with friends, gradually build communities of teachers... Mickey Bolmer, an experienced New York City Writing Project teacher-consultant, was familiar with this sort of change. In 1989, however, he joined a school that was changing rapidly. In the following article he reflects on that experience, and on his changing view of change.

I. Pre-Visions

In January 1987, when Marcia Lyles is appointed English Chair at Erasmus Hall High School, the first African American chair in the school's two-hundred-year history, she feels a responsibility to begin change immediately, before she has a plan, before knowing where change will lead her. She feels confident because of her experience, her studies, and most of all, her clear vision of all students as learners.

First Marcia takes control of Humanities House. Erasmus has been divided into smaller, special interest schools as have many other New York City high schools in response to system-wide directives. If an Erasmus student expresses no special interest in science, business, or performing arts, he or she is assigned to the fourth mini-school, Humanities House. Marcia, Carolyn Wagner, who had transferred from Curtis High School to direct Humanities House, teachers, and students begin by defining their school. Their efforts include a naming contest won by Cheryl Lingard, a student, who writes, "Langston Hughes School for Humanities" because Langston Hughes said 'Hold fast to dreams' and all Humanities House students should be holding fast to dreams."

In the spring of 1989, the growing spirit at the Langston Hughes House for Humanities leads me to apply for a job. Preparing for that interview I draw two pictures to illustrate my growth, during fourteen years of teaching, from a teacher-centered/curriculum approach (pictured as a three tiered fountain) to a learner-centered/process approach (pictured as a swimming pool). When I present Marcia with my pictures, she says, "Yes, Mickey, but pools scare me. And remember that these students are used to teachers not teaching them. They may not understand when you 'release control and invite them to swim.' They may see you as just another teacher who doesn't care to teach. I'm starting to think of learning as an African market, but I see what you mean about active learning. Let's see what happens."

When I join the Langston Hughes School for Humanities in the fall of 1989, I am a good bit nervous. Being European American, having worked only with European-American administrators, and having had few African-American colleagues, I wonder what I can contribute.

* * *

In the spring of 1990, Marcia asks me to do a seminar on reading/writing connections.

"Sure," I say, "but what if students and teachers studied together?"

"Sounds great," she says, smiling.

Our seminar begins this way:

"My father named me after his favorite West Indian boxer," Bob, a Discovery teacher, says.

"Here, let me read from my free-write," Stefanie, a reading teacher, says.

"How is it that teachers share so easily?" Andre, a mostly silent but always there tenth grader, asks. His timing is perfect; a tenth grader is the next to share.

Students and teachers discuss Andre's question, agreeing that "the job" makes teachers talk in front of people but that teachers often feel afraid to truly share.

Brent, strikingly handsome, sophisticated, black belt in Tae Kwon-do, hesitates, looks up at me, needs only a smile and a nod, and says, "I'll read my free-write."

And then we hear from every one of the twenty-two students and nine teachers in the circle.

* * *

On a Saturday in May of 1990, Natasha, Brent, and eight other students meet at a pizza parlor. They talk about professions, goals, making Erasmus better, and then go to the park to play softball. They decide to start regular meetings after school and on some Saturdays.

II. Visions

As I Grew Older by Langston Hughes

*It was a long time ago,
I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun—
My dream.*

*And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose slowly, slowly,
Dimming,
Hiding,
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky—
The wall.*

Please see Change next page . . .

Change. . . . *continued from previous page*

*Shadow.
I am black.*

*I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow.*

*My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!*

From **SELECTED POEMS** by Langston Hughes
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publisher.

* * *

Mention Erasmus Hall High School to a New Yorker over forty and often eyes light up, warm memories flowing, tales told. Then the face scowls, remembering that Erasmus Hall is a now seriously troubled high school. "Well, things have changed at Erasmus" is said with a sad shake of the head.

Change often feels like a banged elbow, making us want to shout at someone, blame someone. When teachers look around, there are the students.

Erasmus Hall High School has changed: learning has dried to a tiny trickle. I hear why on my first day at Erasmus and then over and over again as many teachers, administrators, and staff tell me: "The students are the problem at Erasmus."

Day after day, Erasmus students face teachers who are thinking, "If these students would only learn like my students used to, then I could really do my job!" Much of Erasmus High School has come to need on-going academic failure in order to continue proving that "the students are the problem." Signs of learning are greeted skeptically: "What's the trick? Did you cheat? Who helped you? That teacher gives away grades." Students with language and other learning problems are labeled "trouble" and yet are used as "reasons" for poor school performance. Many students come to expect their teachers to "fail" them, to "disrespect" them. "Students are the problem" is a thick wall separating teachers and administrators from their students.

* * *

Because the forces against change at Erasmus are well entrenched, Marcia Lyles begins with a small group within Humanities House, the 200 ninth graders. The program, called Discovery, is designed to develop school esteem through success at high-level academic learning: 1. All students and all teachers will work for high academic achievement. ("High" is defined as the content and progress necessary for earning a Regents

diploma and going on to college or university.) 2. Teachers and students will value each other and so enjoy being together because learning requires a warm community. 3. Curriculum will relate to the students and since almost all Erasmus students are of the African diaspora, the curriculum will be African-centered. (African-centered scholarship is producing a growing body of curriculum materials, the most famous being the **Portland Curriculum**.)

Marcia then fights for and wins restructuring for the Discovery students. She gathers a group of teachers who are mostly eager to participate and who are mostly African American or Caribbean American. They acquire a corridor of rooms and use it so that students and teachers feel at home in their rooms. They institute a new daily and weekly schedule. They begin new school rituals: Kwanzaa, International Food Fair before parent-teacher night, and Afro-Caribbean Festival.

Marcia changes how students and teachers speak about learning, students and teachers quickly learning that "I passed/they passed" gets little from Ms. Lyles other than, "Why not 85?" Though very busy, anytime someone asks, "What happened in your class today?" Marcia's on her feet acting out a lively moment. She expects to hear about success, achievement, fun, excitement, laughter, learning.

* * *

When I begin teaching at Erasmus in the fall of 1989, my classes go poorly. Though I am teaching writing, my specialty after eight years with the New York City Writing Project, little works, even the tried and true, like journals and free writing.

In early October Raymond and Natasha stay after my worst class to talk. Raymond, handsome, articulate, smooth, and rarely in school, points across the wide, once-elegant Erasmus courtyard and says, "Bolmer, it's like we're over there and you're over here. We can hear you but we can't get to you." Natasha, lovely, quiet, powerful, and an A student, says, "He's right, Mr. Bolmer."

The next day, I take Raymond's "across the courtyard" metaphor to each class, and we talk and write about how to make learning happen. Many express a concern that I haven't yet (early October) given a test. Many are concerned about a vagueness in my assignments and methods—"Why wasn't I teaching?" Reading between the lines and talking it over with Raymond and Natasha, I learn that many students are waiting for "my trick": what will I do so that I can fail them? Until they know my trick, they cannot defeat me and pass.

* * *

"So, Mickey," Marcia says in November of 1989, "are you doing Kwanzaa?"

"What?"

"Kwanzaa. Here, why don't you read this and get together with students period 6 tomorrow, room 319."

I find 319 full of talking students, some dancing to a reggae beat. I try "starting the meeting," i.e. standing in front, frowning and calling for order.

My elbow is politely tapped.

"It's all right, Mr. Bolmer," the elbow tapper says.

"Yeah, they're talking about Kwanzaa. Why don't you sit down. We'll take care of this."

"We'll tell you about Kwanzaa."

"We" turns out to be Orville, Eon, and Lisa and fifteen others released from class or on lunch. This group grows to include many students, a mother directing dancing and then becoming a powerful guest speaker, and teachers finding props, speaking, helping organize.

* * *

Slowly that first fall term, thanks to the Humanities House students, teachers, and parents, I relax and begin to see that by learning to teach with writing, I had gained much that I could now offer to Humanities House.

First and most importantly, I had learned to learn from students. So now I was ready to enjoy students and colleagues as they taught me their ideas, rhythms, needs, joys, hopes, as they taught me how to teach them.

Secondly, I had learned the importance of supportive communities for learning, and writing groups had given me language and attitudes to foster working communities. I could now help the Humanities House community communicate better.

Thirdly, I had become a writer. Writing brings me closer to my students by keeping me a learner, by keeping me excited about the power of discovery.

* * *

Also during that fall term, I learn that some students who are finding my English class boring, my process approaches stupid, and my teaching "not really teaching" are excelling in Dorothy Hardin's Humanities House social studies classes. So I join Dorothy's classes as a student, taking notes, asking and answering questions.

Dorothy is challenging her students to be ready for the first Humanities House hurdle, the tenth grade Global Studies Regents Examination. The test is 40% short answer and 60% essay. The Discovery teachers had covered Africa, Asia, and South America with their ninth graders. Dorothy has to cover all of what Brown University used to call "World History," i.e. Western European History from Egypt to today, review the ninth grade curriculum, keep up with current events, and teach "how to take the test."

Her classes look traditional: a short, well-dressed, middle-aged woman, originally from Guyana, standing in front of students whose faces are up, notebooks open, eyes following. She writes much on the blackboard in a beautiful even script, the students copying word for word. The almost daily homework is always returned with comments. The heart of her class is a steady Socratic discussion of the issues behind the curriculum facts.

* * *

The after-school seminar in the spring of 1990 looks at the language of change. The teachers are paid per-diem and the students are paid with extra credit in their classes.

Our first activity is a small group discussion of articles from that week's New York Times: change in Namibia, the Soviet Union, Haiti, South Africa, and Nicaragua. After the groups get

going, I go over to one where I know two of the four students. Winston is new to my English class; from his journal I know that he is very bright and very determined to be a pilot. I have hardly ever heard his voice in class. Yet here he is talking a mile a minute, smiling, listening, questioning, with students he had never met before the seminar. Monique, part of my "held-back" homeroom, is striking, strong, insightful, loves to dance down the halls, and passed only two subjects the previous term.

"How is your discussion going?" I ask.

"Great!" they say all at once.

"It's like we've become friends already," Monique adds.

We end the first meeting by talking about communication. I introduce the Carl Rogers idea that the first step to change through communication is to let the other person know what you really did hear by saying, "I heard...." For homework everyone is going to change communication, at least once during the week, by hearing first. Everyone leaves smiling, commenting on how different, even fun, these students/teachers are.

The second week, we begin by sharing what happened when people said, "I heard...." Petula interrupted a lecture from her mother to say what she had already heard. Her mother smiled, said, "Oh!" and then they started to "really talk." Kesha came to the unhappy realization that she and her boyfriend had stopped listening to each other. Next we text-render "As I Grew Older" by Langston Hughes, "My Heart Has Known Its Winter" by Arna Bontemps, and "So Is My Life" by Pablo Neruda, and break into groups to prepare choral readings. Later we discuss learning; I offer a "Life in Hell" cartoon and three pictures: a fountain (school-centered/curriculum approach), a swimming pool (learner-centered/process approach), and an African market (community-centered/experience approach). The groups brainstorm their own pictures of learning, share them with the large group, and then we discuss learning at Erasmus. We agree that learning would be best if it were like an African market but that at Erasmus it is most often like a fountain. The homework is to do one thing that week which will make learning more like an African market.

The third meeting begins in confusion and some anger because many people did not know how to do the homework. Four people wrote me letters about their struggle. Then Alice, a bilingual teacher, and Bob, the Discovery and business teacher, warm up the room by describing the African and Caribbean markets they have visited. They try to convey to us how at home they felt, though surrounded by noise, crowds, and clamoring salespeople. This lets Petula and Kesha tell us about getting together at the library to study. Glenn reports bringing three short stories to class rather than one. Natasha, the tenth grader who had stayed after with Raymond, and Alice describe Natasha's visit with Alice's bilingual students so that they could ask questions about Erasmus and New York. Almost every student participated in the discussion, a rare event in a classroom of mostly Haitian students shy of their English and of other students. Natasha is going to visit with two more classes the next week. The seminar homework is to plan with a partner a change to make learning better.

Please see Change next page . .

Change. . . . *continued from previous page*

The fourth week, we share our plans. Natasha and Lillie, a new teacher, began planning by considering what it meant for a teacher to release control, Lillie challenging Natasha with "What if I completely abandon responsibility and power, admitting that I don't know what to teach you and I don't know how to teach you?"

"Well, then, why are you a teacher?" Natasha reacts in disbelief.

But then they develop a plan for self-education complete with daily schedule. Lillie also reports that this discussion and the seminar have helped to make her classes "more effective," more "frequently functioning as a group," students "teaching other students," and freer from the "motivation issue" because she assumed "most of my kids are bright and motivated."

"I do not doubt my ability to teach," Bob reads from the beginning of what he has written, "or to impart knowledge, but sometimes I do question my methodology. I often wonder if I'm really 'Doing the Right Thing,' because for some strange reason I do not get the type of responses that I anticipate. Maybe I see myself in every student and when I don't get the expected responses I become frustrated."

Stefanie, Karen, Monique, and Winston have involved the rest of the sixth period Literacy Center students. The whole group plans to write a group book that will tell about people they admire (among others Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey) and how these people are part of their lives. During the week, they have finished steps 1 and 2 of their plan, pooling their knowledge and dividing up the research.

After this sharing, because many of the students want to "do some writing," we do "Guidelines for Composing," enjoy a long writing time, and then share the pieces in the small groups. This turns out to be a perfect way to end our seminar because almost everyone gets started on a piece and all enjoy a final sharing of "real" writing.

Brent and Natasha knock on my door and ask if they can meet there. The ten from the previous Saturday have talked up their idea and are here with twelve more. They agree to let me stay.

They struggle to find a way to start a club that will bring people together even as it supports students with different needs, hearing from, among others, an African, the president of the Haitian club, and a Muslim. They find three main goals: support for academic achievement towards professions, cultural sharing to bring people together, and taking trips.

At the next meeting the group decides to start inviting teachers, beginning with the Humanities House teachers. There are several Saturday meetings (with me providing some money for pizza or donuts) and a number of after-school meetings with ten to twenty students and three or four teachers.

III. Revisions

In the fall of 1989 when I arrive at the Langston Hughes School for Humanities, the Discovery students and teachers are

actively revising their program, turning Discovery into an African market, an institution rooted in tradition, yet making itself new with each market day, the rooms and hallways becoming booths for all kinds of learning, offering experiences for all kinds of learners, students and teachers everywhere, hanging out, dropping in, a general buzz of excitement.

When I arrive in the fall of 1989, all of Humanities House has shared some of Discovery's restructuring. For example, I will teach only tenth grade Humanities House students and Dorothy Hardin and I will share the same students, allowing us to work together. But other important changes such as the new schedule, the longer periods, the available rooms, and an interdisciplinary curriculum end with the ninth grade program.

This fall, many tenth graders express disappointment—"Where's Discovery?" So everyone is working hard, despite institutional barriers, to change Humanities House, knowing full well that if Humanities House fails to continue the academic achievements begun in Discovery, then Discovery will become a "dry victory," a promise turned to nothing.

That first fall, I do not start failing students as they ask me to, but we do, together, find ways to get learning started. I offer more activity choices, with requirements and grading methods for each choice clearly spelled out.

Some days I do a developmental lesson, complete with mini-lectures and board notes. Other days students work in small groups, some days on their own. Some students continue writing workshop. Some students choose not to study writing at all. Some of these work on SAT vocabulary in programmed-learning workbooks; others read short stories and answer questions. We keep talking and writing about what is and isn't being learned and about what changes we need in order to get more or different learning.

In the fall of 1990, the student meetings grow into a club. Brent, Natasha, Amber, Andre, Nicole, Petula, Roxann, and other students, and Glenn, Gerda, Stefanie, Mary Anne, Carolyn, and I start a club that comes to be called "Youth and Cultures." We meet weekly for study groups, cultural sharing, college/career planning, conversation, trips, and working for change at Erasmus.

IV. Products

Humanities House has a great Kwanzaa celebration.

Some students seeing that I respect Ms. Hardin give my methods a second chance. Others respond to the new choices and the clearer outcomes. Slowly over that first fall term, learning begins to come alive. By the end of the term, three of my four classes have become writing workshops and half of the fourth class (Natasha and Raymond's) is at least learning actively.

In the spring term, students and I enjoy a challenging course called "War and Peace," using Ann Petry's *In Darkness and*

Confusion, June Jordan's *Dry Victories*, a range of short stories, essays and sermons, and Spike Lee's "*Do the Right Thing*" and *Journal*.

* * *

Dorothy Hardin and I come to be a team. In the spring we teach together the writing of the Social Studies Regents Essay. In March we start after-school review sessions, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, often with eight or nine students.

That year 75% of our students pass the tenth Grade Social Studies Regents Examination. The next highest Erasmus passing rate is in the low 40's.

* * *

Working with Dorothy, I can see Discovery's successes. Discovery helped the ninth graders come alive to learning, many achieving school success and esteem. This allows them as tenth graders to learn a Western European curriculum that mostly denies them and their histories.

I see how an African market picture of learning allows two very different teachers to work together, offering their best to each other and their students.

* * *

As I work in the Langston Hughes School for Humanities, I slowly give up a dream to which I have held fast for many years: teaching the "right" way in the "right" school. I now learn that the "right" way is one of many visions and many revisions. I now learn that the "right" school is one of on-going change.

* * *

In the spring of 1990, Monique continues to fail most of her subjects, but on report card day, January 1991, a day of general gloom at Erasmus, Monique comes dancing down the hall, eyes sparkling, waving her report card. She has passed every subject and announces that she will be a twelfth grader in the fall if she passes everything this term. She writes to Glenn, thanking him for his many calls and conversations.

Winston continues to smile, struggle, and learn each day, doing well in many classes though he continues to "fail" the DRP reading test. Kesha is elected Mayor. Petula joins Erasmus's highest track, the Gateway program. Andre is pretty much the same, which is just fine because he is still finding ways to be part of things in his own way.

"Youth and Cultures" members put room numbers and number guides up in the halls at the start of the school year, help organize the 1990 Kwanzaa celebration and the 1991 Afro-Caribbean Festival, exchange with the Haitian club, form study groups for Chemistry and French, the PSAT and SAT, go skating several times, tour Soho galleries, put on a Saturday brunch in Manhattan followed by attending a performance of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. An off-shoot group raises money and goes to Washington for a week as part of the Close-up program.

* * *

During that spring seminar on the language of change, three teachers argue persuasively that there is no way to improve learning at Erasmus until students, families, communities, the

city, the economy, and the government change.

I accept their arguments. Students, families, communities, the city, the economy, the government directly affect learning. But in the next breath I reject these arguments; they leave me, they leave learning communities helpless, hopeless.

Learning requires change. A community is committed to learning to the degree that it is committed to change. Where a community denies change, no vision, no project, no program, no method will promote learning. Where a community denies change, no teaching, no matter how well grounded in theory and practice, no matter how successful somewhere else, will promote learning.

When the Erasmus Hall community made students "the problem," it turned its back on change. This killed, or at least maimed, learning.

When Marcia Lyles insisted on change, gathering students and teachers who insisted on change, learning came to life in the Langston Hughes School for Humanities.

This community's experience offers tools to help other hands break through to learning:

- strong leaders insist on steady change.
- change is done recursively: a back and forth, shared process of pre-vision, vision, and revision.
- people and groups listen by first saying what has been heard.
- the community comes to believe that a person, a class, a community will change, will learn, will break through the walls that separate them from their dreams.

—Mickey Bolmer
Phoenixville, PA

Call for Manuscripts

Workshop 5 in part of Workshop, an annual "about the teaching of writing and reading. Each volume is centered around a theme and featured articles by teacher-researchers of grades K-8, reports of first-hand observations that show a teacher in action and include the voices and writing of students and/or colleagues. Contributors are paid. The editors is currently soliciting submissions for the fifth volume."

Deadline for manuscripts: AUGUST 1, 1992
For more information, please contact:

Thomas Newkirk
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Steal These Ideas

Thomasina LaGuardia, teacher consultant at Wingate High School's Writing Teachers Consortium, passed on some great "steals" from participants in last year's Basic courses. Here are some of the quick ideas she helped gather for classroom writing:

David Reiter, a Health and Physical Education teacher, had the students in his Body Conditioning class write about their bodies at the beginning and at the end of the course. He gave them some guidelines (e.g. Write about your body; Look in the mirror, what do you see?) and he was surprised by the favorable response his students had to writing in a class which usually does not involve any written work. David noted that the students' writings "dealt with the individual and his feelings, insights, motivational level and goals."

English teacher Richard Ehrlich's twist on point-of-view writing was to have his students continue *The Lord of the Flies* (after it ended) from the point of view of *anyone* or *anything still alive* when the boys were rescued. One student chose the perspective of the forest and wrote of the plane crash as having "invaded [my] body" and of the fire as having "burned [my] very skin."

Irene Nachinoff's participation in the Wingate course led her to write about some of the successful writing ideas she's used over the years with her College Bound English students. At the end of a unit on travel and geography in which she uses such realia as subway maps and tourist guides, she has students write letters to "friends" inspired by photographs from *National Geographic* which depict many of the places students "visited" in their "travels."

Irene also uses a point-of-view activity in which each student receives an index card which states "Put yourself in the mind of..." followed by a situation such as a singer on stage at Radio City Music Hall, a pilot whose plane is being hijacked, a deep sea diver whose oxygen tank is running low or a baby being born (to name only a few!). Irene uses index cards for many writing ideas because she finds that students often exchange cards and are sometimes inspired to write more than one piece.

Seema Rosenthal, a Resource Room teacher, uses personal journals and subject area logs with her students. She finds many of her students have difficulty with math and science and keeping logs helps them focus on what they've learned and what they don't understand. Although she's not the teacher of these subjects, she finds their use in addition to personal journals invaluable for her students.

Marie Edwards uses Langston Hughes' poem, "I, Too, Sing America" with her ESL students. They use the poem as a model for their own poems about their experiences in this country and their struggles for acceptance.

Joe Marzocchi is an Educational Evaluator on the Wingate High School School Based Support Team who participated in a WTC course last spring. In his journal entries Joe described how he uses writing with students in the evaluation process. After talking with them, Joe picks up on what he perceives to be a student's strong point and he encourages the student to write about it. Joe feels that he involves the student in "selecting the topic rather than assigning" one. He lets the student know that the writing is not going to be corrected, graded or shared with any teachers. Joe doesn't put a time limit on the writing either. He accepts writing that is completed on the spot and honors requests to take the writing home. When the student decides he is finished, Joe makes a copy of the writing and asks the student to read it aloud as he reads along. Joe feels "this whole experience enables me to gain a clearer understanding of the student. Sometimes it helps me understand how or why he does better in one area of the standardized test as opposed to another area. But most important, it lets me form a better picture of what this student is all about, and how we may better serve him while he is in school and help prepare him for the future. It's not the form of the writing but the content that I focus on. Some of these ideas will resurface consciously or unconsciously on the psychological part of the examination (as reported by the school psychologist). Many times the parent will tell us things that occur at home which have already been reflected in the students' writing. It's truly amazing how all these pieces are reconnected and the puzzle can then be completed! The student's writing sample can many times be an important piece of this puzzle."

When Carole Schwartz, an English teacher at Newtown High School completed Elie Wiesel's *Night* with her students she felt the discussions on the novel had been so emotionally wrenching that she couldn't bring herself to ask students to write essays. So Ed Osterman, the WTC on-site consultant at Newtown, suggested an unusual end-of-book activity. Following Ed's suggestion, Carole photocopied the cover of the book in the center of a blank sheet of paper. She distributed copies of the "book cover" to her students whom she invited to use the space surrounding the cover in any way that they wanted. What resulted were sheets filled with excerpts from reading and response logs, key quotes from the novel, and important words that students learned from the novel. Carole pinned up these book covers along the back wall of the classroom, creating "a wailing wall" of student responses. The visual image was stunning; the comments on the book covers intensely moving.

Do you use a successful classroom writing activity? We'd love to steal it and distribute it to other Project members by publishing it in this column. Please write up a brief description of your idea and send it to the Newsletter!

— Marion Halberg
Brandeis HS

Project Notes

Alas, what I attempted to do when I agreed to write "Project Notes" was to find out exactly what goes on here at Lehman College. There seem to be so many arms and legs to this institute, and I thought I might not be the only one who is curious to know who does what and where. However, that old bugaboo TIME got in the way. When I sent around a memo asking people to send a short bio, a list of recent projects, and any other tidbits they thought would go into Project Notes, I found TIME opposing me. One person wrote back that she didn't have time to write back. Understandable. I appreciated the time it took just to do that....

Veterans and neophytes. It seems that we are so plagued with all-consuming work and projects that not too many of us have time to explain exactly what we do. Not all of us, however. Listed below are several vets of the NYCWP, a few who have joined us recently, and one semi-neophyte.

Kathe Jervis and Carmen Mercado are co-coordinators of the New York City site of The Urban Sites Writing Network, a national project supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. "Some of the country's best teachers teach in urban classrooms," the Network's statement begins. These teachers, it continues, "possess enormous expertise... But in the press of daily classroom life, their deep knowledge about teaching frequently goes unrecognized and unrecorded." Over the next three years fifty experienced National Writing Project teachers from five cities will work together to "tell the stories of their classrooms... The project will provide these urban teachers with resources university-based researchers have long considered essential: time, methodological support, and access to colleagues with whom they can reflect on their practice." Teachers will participate in summer institutes and seminars and in a computer communications network; they will also receive stipends or time off from their teaching.

Linda Vereline and Linette Moorman are co-directors of the JHS Writing and Learning Project. Teachers from their group have met on two Saturdays to discuss team teaching with Clementine Bettis and Michelle Jean Sims, interdisciplinary team teachers from the Philadelphia Writing Project. They have discussed such topics as outside resources (The Philadelphia Historical Society, for example), and shared reactions, problems, hopes, fears, etc. with representatives of schools in the process of implementing interdisciplinary programs. One such school, JHS 141, discussed its pilot program on the Hudson River. Forty teachers attended the Saturday meetings.

Ronald Bleier, of Martin Luther King Jr. HS, has received a \$3,000 grant from The Council for Basic Education to "pursue six weeks" (six whole weeks?) "of independent study on a topic of [his] choice." Ron's choice is "The Birth of Israel: Mainstream and revisionist views." Well, I suppose if the Old Testament is true, and the world was created in six days, Ron

may complete his study in six weeks. Good luck, Ron.

Elaine Avidon, whose name is probably familiar to even the newest of our members, but whose title under even bodily threat I dare anyone to name, is, like many of us, split into many selves. As a faculty member at Lehman in the Department of Academic Skills, she teaches a "developmental" language arts course which she developed entitled "Language, Literacy and Culture." She is also an associate director of the New York City Writing Project and an at-large member of the executive committee of the Institute for Literacy Studies. What is new is that she is currently director of the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN), a program developed by a group of NYCWP elementary school teachers (Barbara Batton, Lila Edelkind, Linette Moorman) which focuses on alternative forms of assessment. Teachers in ETN are working with two assessment frames: the Primary Language Record, developed by Myra Barrs and a team of teachers from schools in London, and the Prospect Documentary Processes, developed by Pat Carini and teachers who are a part of the Prospect Center in Vermont (several of whom are also members of the Philadelphia Writing Project). ETN is also part of an Alternative Assessment Coalition which includes The Elementary School Assessment Project sponsored by the Center for Collaborative Education and the Accountability Project co-sponsored by the Board of Education's Office of Research and The Fund for New York City Public Education.

Wow. And I thought I was something, having four jobs. These people are impressive. That's it, however, for the veterans. Now for the neophyte. Joan Eurell, that's me, is the newest member of the Newsletter staff. A teacher at Empire State College, SUNY, and Ramapo College, SUNY, I took the NYCWP's 1988 Summer Institute with Beverly Marcus and Melanie Hammer, and the Consultants Training Workshop with Elaine Avidon the following spring. Recently I delivered a paper entitled "Longings and Belongings" at the CAWS (that's the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors) conference at Baruch College. The title of the conference was "Is All Writing Autobiography?", and of our panel, "Insiders/Outsiders." In the spirit of all of us at the Writing Project, I co-delivered this paper with a friend of mine, Carole Deletiner, who read her paper entitled, "Why Me?"

A final note — When I called Linda Vereline to find out about the December Writing and Learning Project meeting, she couldn't come to the phone because she was spending TIME with her newborn Christmas Eve baby, Kate. How's that for a present?

Speaking of newborns, I thought I'd mention people having babies, perhaps new recruits to the Project (you never know). I know there are many — it's in the air, I think. So, any of you out there who have done something new, or created something (or someone) new, please let us here at the NYCWP Newsletter know. And, on those bright new beginnings, I think I'll end.

—Joan Eurell
Empire State College

Teachers As Writers

for Jimmy Britton and Nancy Martin

ROCKING THE CONCEPTUAL CRADLE

1. Frank
ly
this
is
a revision for Iowa on the American origins
Myths, Dates Where it began
All aspects of an industry that might dis
man
tle
two
beats, two consonants, nine andahalkeepers
of the parking lot lazy and colloquial

2. Frank
ly
this
is
lazy colloquial
is how we ascribe the keepers
fiction
of
where it began
that dis
man
t
le
two
myths of an industry's consonants

Nine-andahal fkeepers
of another gathering of accordion players

cannot
talk
about
truth
at the turn of a
century

Essay in the Form of a Poem without being Poetic What Is Love Comes to Us In Translation

Fact: There are approximately 68 Moons in Manhattan*
Thesis: "What is love?" she asked
comes to us in translation
body paragraph
one: having been
eclipsed by more than a moon
My husband isn't any Einstein
same stars, same moon
hooking arms
a wall of words around
round the argument
Now the problem I have here
I asked Paul
who said he learned to love the moon
Tonight in the southeast sky
is less than half
Maybe that's the moon
Another Africa
I play with the moon
rocking my body from side to side
so how's the moon
the sky never moves
a bit more than half my lifetime
a symmetrical circle on the slide
if the moon is not full
where is the rest of it
over Miami, on a white page
Blue Moon, Old Devil Moon
Do I love the moon
if I turn my eyes onto
a translucent screen
a Yellow Moon
the wet sky, illusive friend
Dear Mom, Dear Aristarchus
Dear weeble woobles
enough is enough
even when watching the moon
I am learning where to find the moon
Fact. Paul told me we weigh 86% less on the moon
and I wondered if I'd look different as well as weigh less
on the moon
No Paul said
You'd look the same.
Dear Richard, I've been watching the moon.

*see Manhattan White Pages

Dora Alabama
August 1991

Dora Alabama
August 1989

Boundary Poem

I'll need a large R car, a big R trunk
 this is about tacit realities/missing pages
 two bits of territory moving towards chaos
 preparing our linings for what's to come

1. field notes

What life do you have the language to live, she asked
 How many languages have you lived, she asked
 He's a different person in Brooklyn, she granted

2. a mental picture of things left behind
 the dentist, Foucault, paramecium.

3. after a dinner of beans and cabbage
 I could hear them crowd/out my language
 I think you get better pictures if you remove the lens cap

4. dissonant version
 face turns inward
 glasses fog but I know what I mean
 something to do with corn
 It is not clear to me how
 I am able to see all that

5. The question we need to ask
 the data itself
 translations; histories
 Foucault died of AIDS
 Mapplethorpe, Yorio
 Start on a line
 Carlos and Carlos
 Antelopes, the Kangamangus River
 piqued is a word I like

6. I rub Susan's back one night
 whirrs and bits of breeze
 so it is not clear
 how I am able to see all that

7. cross references.

I like what he and I will have to talk about
 (There will be fifty of these and one for good luck)

8. woman is a shifting word
 loves in who holds the word Gods, disciples,
 idols, altars, feathers, iguanas

9. iguana is another word I like
 so why not woman and lint and hands and rock
 and sweetheart and paramour and

10. all the older women in government
 ought to resign now that war has been declared
 the female human being as distinguished from
 chap and fellow and guy

11. traditional permanent
 subjugation to get at the woman more or less
 under that infernal corset

12. Flecknoe say/s of woman worst ye can what prolongs their woe
 but man almost always a word for laughter
 original work in the primeval forest
 not edges or love ing corpulent

Flushing/the Estates

A train/E crossings,
 is a figure/ground issue
 I want to alphabetize negative space
 linoleum floors, formica table tops

13. I am thinking of Ananxemander
 This is design (lyfe), not life
 an other lover of approximation
 Today we will not use that word
 line passing through bend

fine line who/m you love and do not
 is boundary shouts its message
 talk when I do not
 give me a map, a l/ine fine line

14. spectrumZ/o

blivion

Dora Alabama
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