NWP Speaks: 30 Years of Writing Project Voices

The National Writing Project is celebrating its 30th anniversary. As part of the celebration, The Voice has tapped into the collective memory of the organization, asking folks who have been connected with the writing project in various and intimate ways to recount their experiences with the project. In this, the second of five parts to this feature, our writers focus on "defining moments," sharing with readers whatever experiences and memories that phrase may call up for them.

Making It Accessible
BY JOYCE ALBERTS

One of the aims of the National Writing Project is to put an NWP site in reach of every teacher. As first a teacher-consultant and later a site director of a rural site in Oklahoma, I have notions about what accessibility looks like. I remember one night in February 1980 when I was scheduled to do a workshop from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. as part of an on-site series for 25 teachers in Duncan, Oklahoma, a 90-minute drive from the high school where I taught. I called June Richardson, the teacher-consultant coordinating the series, after school that day to check the weather. The forecast was calling for icy roads that night.

Despite the forecast, June decided not to cancel the workshop, and I decided to head out for Duncan and turn back if the weather became a problem. I ended up facilitating the entire three-hour workshop about strategies to support students as they write their writing. I remember the lively, engaged teachers working together in the school library, forgetting for a time the tiredness of the day and the threat of treacherous weather outside. I was home by midnight before the icy weather hit. I was glad that I had made the trip and felt inspired by this group of teachers committed to helping their students be better writers.

As a site director years later, I often thought about how the Duncan teachers had valued the opportunity to learn together. Over time the Oklahoma State Writing Project site has designed programs for teachers in literally every corner of the state and always finds a similar group of engaged, committed teachers at workshops wherever they are held. Making professional writing project development programs accessible to teachers throughout Oklahoma can mean driving long distances and scrambling to make wise use of available time. In the end the response is always worth the time and energy it takes to get there.

Joyce Alberts is an associate director with the National Writing Project.

The Day We Knew We Were Wanted
BY BARBARA KAPLAN BASS

Tension filled the room at the monthly "meeting of the chairs" in the College of Education at Towson University (Maryland). The college, still reeling from the unexpected death of our dean, Dennis Hinkle, had decided to launch into the restructuring toward which he had been working. Our departments had been growing fast, making them unwieldy. It was clear that the Maryland Writing Project would be cut from its moorings in General Education, but where would we go? Who would want us?

Dennis had always understood the value of the writing project; how our work met the mission of the university, our pre-K through 16 focus, our outreach work, our partnership with both urban and rural school systems. But Dennis was gone, and although we had met with the acting dean, Tom Proffitt, we weren't sure he understood our contributions. We are an entity that does not fit neatly into the college.

"Let's start with the Maryland Writing Project," Dean Proffitt said, "Dennis's legacy to our college."

The chair of Elementary Education spoke first. "We want them," he said. "It makes sense since they coordinate the second writing course for our majors." The chair of Early Childhood Education looked slightly alarmed. "They should come with us," he offered. "Their teacher-consultants have been instrumental in the teaching of our second writing course as well." Then the Secondary Ed chair made his claim. "Their summer institute is one of our courses. They belong with us." The department chairs were arguing over us, making their cases like rival suitors competing for the same prized beauty.

That day last semester was a defining moment in the history of our site. It was then that it became clear we were woven into the fabric of the university, that all these chairs knew who we were and of the important work we do. For the last three years, we have received grants from the Maryland Higher Education Commission. Last summer we had 96 applicants for three summer institutes. We have created a site that looks like the teachers we serve. The departments encourage their students to take our courses. Looking at our record, who wouldn't want us?

Barbara Kaplan Bass is the director of the Maryland Writing Project and an associate professor of English at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland.

The Writing Project Goes on the Road
BY RUBY BERNSTEIN

Even today I am mystified as to why Jim Gray asked me to join the first Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) cadre in 1974. True, as a supervisor of student teachers, he had placed several teachers in training in my classes at Ygnacio Valley High School, Concord (California), a half hour east of the Berkeley campus. And I had recently been his student in an extension writing class, studying Francis Christensen's sentences and paragraphs and playing around with "new journalism." But in my mind, I was no hotshot English teacher. I had come into teaching through the back door, as someone trained in journalism. Journalism, I had been told many times, was driver training for English teachers.

What was I doing in the same room with Kate
But Jim had faith in me, as he seemed to have in most all classroom teachers, and I found my place. A few months after the summer institute, I became the saturation report expert. The saturation report is a writing assignment I still use today. Its focus is on generating a piece of nonfiction writing from multiple and varied sources. It was a genre that fit in well enough with my journalism training. I started leading workshops in Northern California schools. I remember the tenor of ending a sixth-period class and then speeding down highway 680 to San Jose for a 4:15 p.m. workshop. But as the teachers and I tried out best practices, interviewing, and writing, fatigue evaporated—theirs and mine.

During the early years, many BAWP teacher-consultants went on the road in the summer to support writing project sites. It took these visits seriously because I believe in the model of teachers teaching teachers, and, as another BAWP teacher-consultant told me recently, “I didn’t want to screw up.” My travels for the writing project took me outside California, through many of the 50 states, and beyond. In the 1990s, I took the writing process to Lithuania where I was a volunteer with APPLE—American Professional Partnership for Lithuanian Education. In Lithuania, I worked with amazing men and women, faculty recently unleashed from the Soviet education system. Speaking through a translator and with all my BAWP materials translated into Lithuanian, I encouraged my students to study, discuss, and write. One afternoon, after they agreed to role-play reporters so we could write a campus saturation report, they descended on the Vilnius Teacher Training Academy. The experience did not go well. Some of the interviewers returned with wounded spirits: in the summer of 1992, the gardeners and custodians they encountered were too suspicious of these teacher-reporters to answer questions.

This was not the first time in my years as a teacher-consultant that things didn’t go as planned. We didn’t get our saturation report, but the experience led to a discussion of the hangover that was the aftermath of totalitarian rule. I was a long way from home, but I was encouraging the probing and the openness that have always been the hallmarks of the writing project.

RUBY ERNST is a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project, California. She taught high school English from 1962 until retirement in 1993, and is now an adjunct teacher of composition at Laney College, Oakland, California.

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A Director’s Fairy Tale
BY BRITTON GILDERSLEEVE

Once upon a time, in a summer institute not so long ago and far away, a writer was transformed into a teacher-consultant. Like many teacher-consultants, she dreamed of giving back to the project that had done so much for her.

Almost magically, this teacher-consultant—me—inherited a priceless legacy—a vital, “exemplary” writing project site. But here the fairy tale takes a dark detour. I found myself overwhelmed, lost in paperwork, and confounded by budgets. My waking nightmare was that the teacher-consultants would figure out how little I knew about being a director.

But as in many fairy tales, I was then offered wisdom that made possible a “happily ever after.” It was the summer of 2002. As I was sitting with Pat Mumford and Eileen Simmons, members of the site leadership team, someone uttered the words that completely changed my thinking about the site: “We’re like a multinucleate cell—one living organism with multiple sites of activity.”

Then it was Pat talking: “Leadership isn’t just central anymore.”

Eileen elaborated, “Work is at the heart of the entire project, but the work is a shared responsibility. The director alone can’t make much happen.”

I was stunned. They’re right. The site work, and each teacher-consultant who takes on leadership responsibility… they’re at the core of everything we do. I might fill out the papers, drive to Oklahoma City to meet with a school that wants us to do two days of workshops, provide the celery sticks and meringue cookies for a brainstorming meeting, but what I do is only one small piece of the work that makes this a successful site.

What Pat and Eileen were telling me was real magic: “It’s not about you. There’s the leadership team; there’s the council; there’s the professional development co-director. We have multiple sites of leadership, depending on the work.”

These were the words that ended my two- and-a-half years of struggle and self-doubt. Listening to Pat and Eileen, I saw, in a way I’d never seen before, the everyday magic of site leadership: teacher-consultants, co-directors, and directors working together in a hundred unique and individual ways to support each writing project site. Being a director is really just standing out of the way of gifted teachers who only need someone to give them a place to stretch their talents. As long as I remember that, our site can keep moving steadily into writing project “happily ever after.”

BRITTON GILDERSLEEVE is the director of the Oklahoma State University Writing Project.

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No Good Reason
BY LYNETTE HERRING-HARRIS

After finishing a unit on the westward expansion, I wrote on the board, “Write about how the westward expansion changed the United States.” The prompt was on the board. I’d read it aloud. My students had paper and pencil. I was a new teacher, and I was teaching writing in the content area. All that research I’d been reading had made it sound so complicated. Yet, here I was embedding writing in my elementary social studies class. And just to be sure that I was a really good teacher of writing in the content area, I read the prompt a second time.

Everyone but Samantha looked down at their papers and at least pretended they were writing. But Samantha, who sat in the third seat of the second row, pushed up the unhemmed sleeve of the shirt she’d torn during recess and thrust her little smudged hand high into the air.

“What do you want, Samantha?” I shot the question like a bullet. Why in the world wasn’t this child writing? Didn’t she realize we were having a content-based writing experience? “Why aren’t you writing?”

“Miz H., you ain’t give us no good reason to write.”
Samantha’s innocence had unveiled a nasty truth. I really didn’t understand how to give
students a good reason to write. Nor did I
know how to help students become good
expository writers.

That spring, I was one of two elementary
teachers invited to the first summer institute
sponsored by the Mississippi State University
Writing/Thinking Project, the oldest writing
project site in Mississippi. I carried
Samantha’s words with me as I
participated in those five weeks
of writing, questioning, reading,
and learning with other teachers
of writing. Each time I watched a
demonstration lesson, I found
myself wondering if Samantha
would think she’d been given a
good reason to write. When I read
research on writing across the
disciplines, I asked myself if
Samantha would think that the
research gave her a reason to
write. As I revised my own writing
and experimented with new
pedagogy, I asked myself if
Samantha would approve.

Now, as the assistant director of
the Mississippi State University Writing/
Thinking Project, I still hear Samantha’s voice
questioning our site’s work. “Hey, Miz H., does
the site programming give teachers a good
reason to want to study their practice? Hey,
Miz H., just how are those continuity
meetings giving those teachers a good reason
to grow personally and professionally? Hey,
Miz H., is the summer institute so relevant to
the needs of the teachers in our service area
that it gives them a good reason to give up five
weeks of their really short summer?”

Eighteen years ago, the National Writing
Project challenged Mississippi teachers like me
to reflect on how we taught students, how we
refined our teaching, and how we shared our
beliefs about the teaching of writing with
teachers and policymakers. Thanks to Jim
Gray’s vision, I found a real good reason to seek
out racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity forsite leadership that reflects the cultural and
ethnic diversity of our service area and ensures
that teachers of low-income, rural students
have access to quality services by continually
improving the professional development we
offer and making it more relevant to the needs
of teachers served by our writing project site.

LYNETTE HERRING-HARRIS is a co-director of the
Mississippi State University Writing/Thinking
Project.

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My Short and Happy Life with the
Morehead Writing Project

BY LIZ MANDSELL

Ten years ago I was a high school English
teacher, plodding through personal narratives
(“My First Deer”) and research papers
(“Robert Goddard: Father of Modern
Rocketry”). Even though I was a writer and
polish and sawdust. The director, Joy
Gooding, read aloud E. B. White’s “Once More
to the Lake.” White describes this particular
lake as his “holy spot,” and, on legal pads
angled on our knees, we went straight to our
own holy spots: tobacco barns, storm cellars,
tree houses, the bed of a junked pickup in the
field.

That first day we all cried for one reason
or another. Maybe the rain that beaded on
Breck’s wavy old windows or the
smell of incense that Joy burned in
a small pot on her desk. Someone
stuck a pencil in an apple and called
it art. A woman named Verna,
suffering a sudden migraine, left
right after lunch. “This isn’t what I
expected,” she said.

Joy told us to write all the stories
that we knew and some that we
didn’t. “Lie if you have to,” she said.

The librarian wrote about
heartache, the science teacher
wrote about death, the
kindergartener wrote about
delivering ice to her daddy. I
wrote about passing out drunk in a
cemetery, and my new friend Rose
wrote about her uncle Pearl who got shot
trading knives in Montgomery County. We
rolled on, writing about sorghum and
applesauce, lost causes, disappointments, and
tailspins. We wrote under trees, on the
sidewalk, and on the old mats, musty and
worn, pulled from under the bleachers of the
old Breck gym.

Over the years, I’ve gone to many conferences,
slept through professional development
seminars, done time at Saturday technology
sessions. I’ve been to writing workshops,
three writing retreats, and even holed myself
up for a summer in a house near the Ohio
River to write, but I’ve never had as profound
a professional education experience as those
four weeks in July 1994.

The academic jargon of that summer—
professional transformation and portfolios
and best practice and building classroom
communities—lost its flavor long ago. But
the experience, the power of people engaged,
making meaning, bearing witness to their lives
and the world around them is the one thing
that I remember and that I try to create in my
writing classes every single day of the
semester.

LIZ MANDSELL is a teacher-consultant with the
Morehead Writing Project, Kentucky.
It's About Writing
by Patricia McGonegal

From the start, we were anxious to share ideas at our site. Several of the pieces of National Writing Project work are easy to sell. Do you want some

great ideas for teaching writing? Want a book that will inspire and guide you? Want better professional development? Communication between K-12 teachers and their university colleagues? Sure! Yes! Is there any more we can have?

One element is a hard sell. It's called writing. We realized early on that this was the scary notion: We're fine with talking about writing, looking at writing, and even reading writing. But do some? Ummmm, excuse me, but we just remembered we have something important to do.

In our early years at NWP, we saw this naked fear on the faces of our summer institute participants. Some confessed they put off application to the institute because we asked for a writing sample. In an effort to make inservice more comfortable for teachers, I actually shrunk the proportion of writing time in the sessions and, now and then, deleted it entirely!

My teacher-consultants brought me back. Meeting last summer to hammer out new inservice courses, they insisted that we dedicate a large chunk of each session to actual writing by the teachers. Doing some in class and for homework. Getting into response groups, and giving each other feedback on writing.

Are our teachers still threatened by all this writing? Yes. But once they get started, the process takes over. We are about writing. Not just student writing. We write. We sweat and think and rethinks. We revise. We fail. We start over. We get inspired by each other's and by published writing.

In Chicago a few years ago, Kim Stafford led a group at the NWP Annual Meeting through a wonderful writing session. Richard Sterling introduced Kim as the guy who kept reminding him, as my teacher-consultants remind me again and again, "Remember, it's about writing."

Patricia McGonegal is the director of the National Writing Project in Vermont.

A Chance Encounter Makes All the Difference
by Meg Peterson

When I look at the Plymouth Writing Project (New Hampshire) now, three years after our site began, with our invitational and advanced institutes, inservice programs, and school partnerships, it is hard to believe that the project really started by chance. Of course, the conditions were there, but you can go about not suspecting anything until a spark sets off the inferno.

I was cruising through the exhibit hall at the 2000 NCTE Annual Convention in Milwaukee when I chanced upon the National Writing Project booth. Unable to pass up the opportunity to win a year of The Quarterly for guessing the author of a quote, I stopped. I won the game and lingered a moment to glance at the materials and site directory. I noticed that there were no writing project sites in my state. From there, I started asking questions.

James Gray happened to be close by autographing copies of his book Teachers at the Center, his memoir of the early years of the writing project. We sat down to talk about my college, the writing project, and the commonalities in how we felt about teachers and writing. I experienced the sensation I have had at various points in my life of coming home, of knowing suddenly and absolutely that I had been waiting for this moment to arrive. This feeling has never failed me. Everything Jim Gray said echoed the beliefs I had been developing over the years about teacher empowerment, the importance of writing, and school reform. I had been at Plymouth State University (then Plymouth State College) for nine years, preparing middle and secondary English teachers and gradually building up a network of teacher-writers. For years a group of teachers and I had been publishing the Plymouth Writers Group—an anthology of teachers' writing—and the journal had started to gain critical acclaim. In collaboration with another group of teachers, we were holding an annual conference for high school writers and publishing an anthology of their work. The writing project philosophy provided the key mechanism for moving the teachers with whom I had been working into leadership positions. We were ready.

Forty-five minutes later, I left the National Writing Project booth armed with copies of The Quarterly, The Voice, information about starting a new site—and an autographed copy of Jim Gray's book, in which he wishes me luck with my application. While I hadn't formally committed to starting the Plymouth Writing Project, the project was already taking shape in my mind, born out of that chance encounter.

Meg Peterson is the director of the Plymouth Writing Project, New Hampshire.

A Few Good Words Along the Way
by Carol Tateishi

For me, the writing project has had a way of plucking me out of my various comfortable niches in life and setting me on journeys for which I haven't necessarily been ready.

In 1983, for example, I was a pretty happy soul, teaching English to eighth-graders, the bane of many teachers but my favorite grade to teach. Attending the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) Summer Institute that year, however, challenged me as a teacher, and I remember returning to school in the fall, humbled by all I didn't know, and knowing things would never be quite the same again.

Then came 1989, when Jim Gray and Mary Ann Smith invited me to work part-time at the BAWP office. By the next year, I had accepted a full-time position as administrative director. I figured a year or two more with BAWP and then back to my eighth-grade classroom. But that was not to be.

To my true amazement, Jim and Mary Ann asked me to become BAWP's director. My answer was simple: no. They said to think about it, which I did for a very long time, finally saying yes with great uncertainty about my ability to fill the big shoes that had preceded me.

Soon after I accepted the position, Jim Gray called me to his office. He sat me down in a chair and looked seriously at me across the expanse of his desk. "At last," I thought. "I'm going to learn all about being BAWP's director. The veil will be lifted, and I will understand all."

Instead, Jim leaned across his desk, placing his elbow in front of him and wiggling his index finger.
My Conversion
BY ANNA COLLINS TREST

Until the summer of 1997, I believed that real writers were an exclusive group of which I was not a member. Real writers were people who lived in picturesque areas where they sat all day with pen and furrowed brow and laboriously churned out page after page of flawless prose. They were odd or eccentric people who wrote convoluted verbiage with deep, hidden, underlying, significant, psychological meaning. I wanted very much to be a real writer, but that description didn’t fit me at all, and I didn’t write like that. In addition, I’d received little encouragement from public school teachers who, on the rare occasions they gave me opportunity to write, marked my papers mercilessly; nor was I encouraged by college professors who maintained that my writing wasn’t like theirs and thus not good enough.

I became a teacher with a skewed picture of writers and writing. I might as well have said to my students, “I may not be a real writer, but I am certainly more real than you. Give me that fine-tooth comb and let me run over your paper a time or two. So what if it looks like botched surgery. If you can’t be real, and you can’t, at least you can be right.” And that was my attitude… until the summer of 1997.

In the summer of 1997, I was a participant with the South Mississippi Writing Project Summer Institute and… well… you know the story. It’s been told many times in slightly different ways but always with the same headline: “Teacher Has Epiphany at Summer Institute” She discovers she is a real writer! Lo and behold, so are her students! My concept of writers and writing was changed forever. Just suppose there wasn’t a writing project. Suppose I’d never been invited.

After many years as a public school teacher, ANNA COLLINS TREST is currently a full-time instructor in the Curriculum and Instruction Department of the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. She also serves as the director of the South Mississippi Writing Project.