NWP Speaks: 30 Years of Writing Project Voices

Over the next year, The Voice will be celebrating the 30th anniversary of the National Writing Project, which had its beginnings in 1973 with the creation of the Bay Area Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley.

During this anniversary year, we’ll be offering in-depth features that look at the work of the project past and present. One of these features will be a five-part “oral history.” We’ll be asking folks who have been connected with NWP in various and intimate ways to recount their experiences. In this issue, we focus on beginnings: from the mythic origins of the Bay Area Writing Project to stories of first encounters with the writing project to the recent beginnings of new sites. So, not to put too fine a point on it, let’s, in fact, begin at the beginning.

An excerpt from
Teachers at the Center
by James Gray

There we were—29 of us, counting the co-directors and myself—on a Monday morning in the summer of 1974, the first day of the first invitational institute of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP)....

Walking into the room, one teacher, Joan Christopher, could not believe her eyes. “I really didn’t think anyone would be there,” she told me later. “I was thinking maybe I was the only teacher in the world who cared about teaching writing.”

This was an exciting but very bumpy time as we began to bring together key elements of the model.

We were reluctant to ask everyone to give a demonstration, but the teachers who did show us their successful classroom practices confirmed our belief that the summer institute would cross-pollinate the successful teaching of writing as perhaps no other structure could. 

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One demonstration in particular opened our eyes. Kate Blickhan, a teacher at Sir Francis Drake High School in Marin County [California], who would become principal of a neighboring school, demonstrated the concept of holistic scoring. This process allowed student writing to be assessed and ranked according to an agreed-upon rubric and in comparison to other students. It had been used at College Board readings for some time. However, it was a concept foreign to most classroom teachers. Not everyone present that day felt comfortable with the idea that a piece of student writing could be assessed without marking it up. But Kate explained that the purpose of holistic scoring at the school level was not to comment on an individual student’s mastery of subject-verb agreement, but to give teachers, departments, and schools information that they could use to strengthen their writing programs. Everyone present that day took away from Kate’s demonstration something they had not thought of before. (53-55)

JAMES GRAY launched the Bay Area Writing Project (University of California, Berkeley), the first school reform effort to give full attention to the knowledge of teachers, in 1974, following his distinguished career as an English teacher and teacher educator. For the next 20 years, he worked to advance the writing project model, which now flourishes at 175 sites. Gray retired as the National Writing Project executive director in 1994, but remains active as a member of the project’s board of directors.

Understanding Purpose

by MILES MYERS

In 1974, within the walls of Tolman Hall on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, the goals of the first Bay Area Writing Project summer institute were clear. Jim Gray introduced each of us, providing rich details from our teaching lives, and by the end of those introductions, we all knew why we were there—to share what we knew about the teaching of writing and to get as much as we could from an accomplished collection of colleagues. I do not recall any mention of a “writing crisis.” But outside the walls of the institute, in the world of grant writing and money grubbing and rationalizing action, the so-called writing crisis captured the headlines. In some of the early press coverage, the project’s goals were often reported as “the correction of the massive failures of K-12 teachers in the teaching of writing” or, more kindly as, “doing something about the decline of writing skills in K-12 schools.” (As usual, of course, no one had any reliable evidence that such decline had actually taken place.) In many articles, BAWP was described as if it were fixing a newly discovered teaching disease, lumping BAWP with the usual band of profit takers trying to make money by alleging failures in the K-12 teaching staff.

In the first national article about the assumptions of the Bay Area Writing Project (Gray and Myers), we were still struggling with how to communicate accurately the goals of the project. The leading school reformers were promoting “teacher-proof curriculum materials” (very similar to the scripted reading lessons of recent years), one shot “inservice” (continuous inservice was almost unheard of), and one-answer, context-less solutions (urban teachers, particularly, got fed-up with suburban types telling harried city teachers what to do). The writing project stood in opposition to all this. Said the 1978 article, “Curriculum change cannot be accomplished with a packet of ‘teacher-proof’ materials [or by] transient consultants who briefly appear, never to be seen again, or by change agents who insist that everyone see the problem in the same way.” It took some time for us BAWPers to get clear on a central point: Our first job was not to prescribe nostrums to treat the writing crisis, but rather to build professional structures for teachers of writing to share what they knew about the teaching of writing with other teachers.

MILES MYERS is a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project (University of California, Berkeley), a former co-director and later administrative director of BAWP, the California Writing Project, and the National Writing Project. He also served as the executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English.

On First Hearing About the Bay Area Writing Project

BY SHERIDAN BLAU

I first met Jim Gray in 1975, shortly after he had directed the first Bay Area Writing Project Summer Institute. He was accompanied by Albert “Cap” Lavin, a legendary high school English teacher from Marin County (California), who had been Jim’s closest collaborator in the founding of BAWP. They had come to report to the English Liaison Committee on their new professional development project. This committee, funded by various segments of education in California, was charged with promoting communication between and among faculty and administrators at all levels of public and private education in California.

I was a young associate professor of English and had been appointed to the committee as a University of California (UC) representative by virtue of my role as head of UC Santa Barbara’s teaching credential program in English. On the day of Jim’s presentation, I knew nothing of the writing project. But I was not the only one present who later became deeply involved with the project’s activities. The other UC representative was Wayne Harsh, a linguist in the English Department at UC Davis, who, a few years later, played a key role in starting the Area 3 Writing Project (also in California). Nancy McHugh was also on the committee representing secondary English teachers, and it was Nancy who, two years later, obtained...
funding to run a writing project site within the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Another member of the committee was Jim Cagnacci, who eventually chaired the advisory committee for the California Writing Project. And it was on this committee that I first met George Nemetz, who served as a consultant to the committee in his role as the specialist in English for the California Department of Education. George had worked with Jim on earlier professional development projects and would have known about BAWP almost from the start. A few years later George played a major role in securing support from the California Department of Education for the California Writing Project (the network of California sites) and he was instrumental in ensuring that the writing project would be intimately involved in developing language arts policy and language arts assessment for the entire state.

Except for George and possibly Nancy, it was the first time any of us had heard of the Bay Area Writing Project or of the revolutionary idea they were proposing about teachers teaching teachers and becoming writers. I was interested but skeptical, and though I was flattered later in the day when Jim offered to help me establish a similar project on my campus, I declined, unable to imagine finding my place in the Santa Barbara area more than a smattering of English teachers (the only kind of teachers in the first BAWP institute) who would be ready or willing to do any writing of their own or to entertain any ideas about the teaching of writing beyond their unexamined faith in the five-paragraph theme and a focus on grammar lessons.

Though I wasn't ready at the time to understand or enact the principles of professional development that Jim was just beginning to articulate for the writing project, I nevertheless felt that in Jim Gray and Cap Lavin I had met colleagues and potential mentors from whom I had a great deal to learn on questions that I had never before thought to ask. It would be another three years before I was ready to entertain radically new ideas about professional development — including my own — and to begin my initiation into a writing project community that transformed my entire professional life. But I can trace the arc of learning that marked my career as a writing project site director back to that meeting with Jim and Cap in 1975.

SHERIDAN BLAU is director of the South Coast Writing Project (University of California, Santa Barbara) and a former president of the National Council of Teachers of English.

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My First Encounter with the Writing Project

BY BOB TIERNEY

It was the spring of 1978. Members of our mostly male veteran science department bristled at the thought of sitting through another presentation from some outside authority telling us how to teach. Now a teacher of English from the Bay Area Writing Project was going to suggest we put more emphasis on writing across the curriculum. It didn't help when the vice principal stood at the door of the auditorium checking off our names as we entered.

Mary K. Healy, one of the original BAWP participants, sat apprehensively on the stage before us. Her presentation was delayed because the principal was answering questions about the tardy policy, the same questions that came up at every faculty meeting. The coaches sat in one corner scribbling X's and O's. The English teachers, huddled together in another corner, had smug "I-told-you-so" looks on their faces. Many members of our faculty sat, bent over, correcting papers. We science teachers sat in the front row, glaring at the speaker.

Mary K. asked our faculty to describe how a catalytic converter worked. We science teachers perked up. This presentation was going to be active, not like some of the passive, boring presentations we endured before. While the rest of the faculty looked perplexed, we scribbled away, confident in our knowledge. Catalytic converters were our kind of stuff. Sharing our writing, however, made us embarrassingly aware that our knowledge of catalytic converters was as superficial as our students' knowledge of science concepts.

Mary K. explained that expressive writing, with an emphasis on process and the writing of more than
one draft, can lead to a deeper understanding of concept. The idea paralleled what Robert Karp plus, the physicist, was talking about when he advocated the Learning Cycle approach to science education. It made sense. I was eager to learn more.

Two years later I was one of the first science teachers to experience a Bay Area Writing Project Summer Institute.

Bob Tierney is a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project (University of California, Berkeley). He retired from the classroom after 32 years of teaching high school biology and general science.

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Memories of the First Directors Meeting
by Donald R. Gallo

We held our first summer institute [at the Northern Virginia Writing Project] in 1978, and four months later I attended the first directors meeting in Kansas City. We were directors of dissemination sites of the Bay Area Writing Project, as the National Writing Project was then called, and our sites had come into existence because of a half-million-dollar grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I’m sure there were many items on Jim Gray’s agenda, but the only one I remember was a question: Was the BAWP model replicable around the country? I was surprised that anyone could ask the question. After all, hadn’t we all finished a highly successful summer institute, hadn’t we all launched our in-service programs in the schools, hadn’t we all met with our teacher-consultants several times in developing our continuity programs? If it worked in Northern Virginia, why wouldn’t it work everywhere?

What I didn’t know until the discussion got rolling was that not all site directors followed the model as closely as I had. At first I felt naive. I had taken the proposal guidelines as a list of things I was to do. I knew in my bones they would work because I could read between the lines and see the underlying philosophy, one that celebrated teachers and good teaching. How could that not work? Gradually my naiveté turned to gratitude. The problems other site directors were having emanated from not following the model.

My second memory of that event is of the experience of seeing Ken Macrorie having dinner with Bob Boynton, both heroes of mine. Macrorie’s book Uptight had become my manifesto for teaching writing in a way that was consistent with my own instincts of how writers wrote. And my third memory has to do with a car that pulled up beside a group of us as we walked back to the hotel. Three women offered their services. We refused, of course, framed our view of the trees.

In those first minutes of that first day of the summer institute, I wrote:

“Welcome! We are writing.” It says so on the board, which I didn’t see until after Anne said we are writing and sat down and turned around. I felt I have to write for an hour daily. I’ll use up notebooks too fast. How the hell long will that go on? I’m really uncomfortable. Most people are not writing, but being a closet nonconformist—or maybe I’m a closet conformist—I’m writing. Under all this, Peter Elbow is singing freewrite—the article I read last night to prepare for today.

So began the deep pleasures of writing and reading my writing, of thinking and reading and talking about writing with people—those same ones who weren’t writing that first day—who cared as passionately as I did. Writing my process paper, I described my arm swooping in generous curves across the blackboard as I learned to write an S in first grade, and I felt that swoop in my muscles as I typed. I learned from my writing group, which kept meeting for ten years, how to pay attention to words and structures and the feelings they embody.

But so much of what I remember is mixed with memories of later summers, because I became a perpetual writing project participant: a teacher-consultant my first year, assistant director and Ph.D. student, co-director, and finally director. So I started over many times. Along the way, that rural teacher center became instead more writing projects and the Washington State Writing Project Network.

Writing took me from that rural setting to the city of Seattle where I write these words, wrapping up before meeting as a teacher-consultant with some rural principals to plan professional development. So it goes on and “We are writing.”

Linda J. Clifton is a teacher-consultant with the Puget Sound Writing Project, University of Washington.

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Back in 1981
by Richard L. Graves

When Jim Gray came to Auburn University (Alabama) in 1981 for the organizational meeting of the Sun Belt Writing Project, he told me something I'll never forget. "The biggest obstacle to the writing project," he said, "is the university professor." At that time I thought he was talking about "those other guys," but over the years I realized he was talking directly to me. What he said is just as true and important today as it was back in 1981.

Writing project directors soon come to realize that the goals of the university and the goals of the writing project sometimes come into conflict. The university says, "Develop a national reputation through research and publication." The writing project says, "Make a difference in the lives of people, especially classroom teachers and the young people they serve." Looking back, I can see now that I was not very astute in juggling these diverse goals.

But it can be done, and those who are successful in this balancing act will discover a very rewarding and satisfying professional life. What is the secret? First, find a good balance; don't go too far to either extreme. Stay true to both goals but still hold a middle ground. Second, explain both your goals and problems to your administrators, both in the university and the writing project. Third, maintain a good sense of humor, pray a lot, and find a bit of luck.

Jim Gray, you are a wise old bird, and I'm still learning from you.

Richard Graves is professor emeritus of curriculum and teaching at Auburn University. He is the founder of the Sun Belt Writing Project and the Alabama statewide writing project network.

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Project Fever
by Marjorie M. Kaiser

The Louisville Writing Project (Kentucky) is situated in the center of a very large school district. On establishing our site, we needed the assistance of this district as well as that of our university community. We began operating with the support of an advisory board made up of the president of the University, the superintendent of schools, and the deans of Arts and Sciences and Education. This group met every few months to receive our annual updates and progress reports. We sought their advice on various issues that came up in the course of running our site. In general, they applauded our efforts and occasionally raised pertinent questions.

At one meeting after two or three summer institutes, the superintendent expressed a certain impatience with the small number of teachers (20) that had enjoyed the benefit of the summer
institute experience each summer. My co-director and I gracefully tried to reiterate what we had initially explained to the group—why 20-25 teachers could work together comfortably in ways that 40, 50, or 100 could not. We spoke of teacher demonstrations replicating, in part, a classroom situation, of the size of meeting rooms, of the necessity of a smaller group for the essential building of a cadre.

Still the superintendent insisted, "I just don't see why you can't do more teachers!"

We painstakingly reviewed the project principle of teaching teachers and detailed how these teacher-consultants were committed to serving other teachers and assisting them in their own schools and in districtwide inservice workshops. But it was not enough. He admired the project goals and our efforts, and he wanted more teachers to have the zeal he had seen in some of us. Most important, he wanted it quickly.

The dean of education, who understood more of the philosophy of what we were about than any other member of the group, finally intervened: "Don, you just want the project to be like a vaccination. Teachers line up, roll up their sleeves, and get the shot. Then they walk away enlightened. Sorry, Don. It just doesn't work that way. And besides, what a vaccination does is simply assure that you'll never catch the real bug, the zeal. These teacher-consultants have Project Fever big time. They spread their skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm everywhere they go."

After that session the superintendent never again asked us whether we could do more teachers in the summer institute. He came to understand the necessity of leadership development and the glory of the ripple effect.

MARCIA KAISER is the former director of the Louisville Writing Project (University of Louisville, Kentucky).

Something Lost in the Translation

by BERNADETTE GLAZE

It sounded like such a great idea. In 1982 the principal of a suburban high school in Northern Virginia asked the Northern Virginia Writing Project (NVWP) to teach a three-credit, graduate level course on the teaching of writing to every faculty member of his school. The NVWP had been going strong since 1978 and had already established a strong track record among educators in our area due to the quality of our programs and our belief in teachers. The whole school

So what was the real deal? We found out that the assistant superintendent of instruction had said to the principal: "Don't you think this (having the course for the whole school) is a good idea?" And the principal had heard: "You will have this course for the whole school." And the teachers had heard: "The central office is requiring this course...." We had been set up for the first and last time.

BERNADETTE GLAZE is co-director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project (George Mason University).

How We Change

by MARLENE CARTER

I had been teaching for about six years when I stumbled across a UCLA Extension class on teaching writing in K-12 classrooms. It was taught by Rae Jean Williams, one of the directors of the UCLA Writing Project.

Almost immediately I clashed with Rae Jean. She introduced us to writing as a process and explained that writing instruction should not be solely centered on correcting mechanical errors in student papers. "I teach 11th grade English," I wrote angrily in my journal. "If students don't learn to spell, punctuate, and capitalize from me, when will they learn?"

Rae Jean patiently responded that we should address mechanical errors during the editing phase of the writing process. I relaxed a bit as I realized that my complaints had been heard. But I continued to be skeptical. Gradually, as I experienced each new strategy, I dropped my defenses and changed my thinking. A few months later, I applied for the summer invitational where my transformation would continue.

At the time I wondered why Rae Jean put up with my complaints. I wondered why she respected me as a teacher even when I reacted negatively to what she presented. I know now that the UCLA Writing Project doesn't run from intellectual arguments. We engage in them because teachers deserve to be heard, and they need time to think and to experience what we have to share. The fellows we want are not people who blindly follow every new teaching fad. They are thoughtful people who examine, and, when necessary, challenge new ideas. Because we don't do one-shot professional development, we give teachers
time to grow and change. That’s what writing projects do.

MARLENE CARTER is a co-director of the UCLA Writing Project.

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Central Texas Writing Project Beginnings (and Continuings!)

BY LIZ STEPHENS

Texas history is a story of persistence and chance taking, ideals that weave through tales of conquistadores, the Alamo, the Republic of Texas, all the way to the Johnson Space Center. In Texas, the riskier the endeavor, the more reason to try it.

I, however, did not know how risky a business I was letting myself in for when, in 1998, Richard Sterling called to inform me that the Central Texas Writing Project had joined the NWP family. I immediately began recruiting for the first summer institute at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) in San Marcos, starting with people I knew. I met with administrators at districts that had working relationships with our College of Education. They were highly receptive, as I’d hoped. I was welcomed and provided the name of at least one talented teacher to invite to the first summer institute. Once outside my comfort zone, though, things were different.

My first indication that trouble lay ahead was the response to my phone call to set up an appointment for a visit with an administrator outside my comfort zone. The woman’s voice was frosty cool. “We already work with the writing project,” she said.

Well, yes, but her writing project, a for-profit venture, was not the National Writing Project with its community building summer institutes, extended staff development, and continuity programs.

She wasn’t impressed.

One group of district administrators invited me in and then spent most of the appointed hour telling me about their work with another writing project. How was mine different? I tried to explain. “But, how would your writing project raise test scores?” they wanted to know.

I soon learned that in some districts our writing project was off-limits. One highly talented teacher I met told me she would love to come to the institute but could not because her district would not allow it. She came, almost under cover, and is now one of our strongest teacher-consultants. She still works at the same district, and I suspect that they are not quite aware of her secret teacher-consultant life. She, the 90 other teacher-consultants from our site, and educators who have worked with us since 1998 understand and praise the NWP model that clearly sets us apart from the others. They realize that ours is a uniquely student-centered and teacher-focused professional development organization, the only one with a connection to a vast and expanding national network and a long history of federal support. A big part of my job has been to distinguish for the educators I contact the difference between the work of the NWP and the work of other writing projects.

And, as it turns out, our writing project is having great success. In the last five years our state has doubled the number of NWP sites to eight. We have a strengthening state network with a leadership team and the support of the NWP State Network Action Plan. Brochures, websites, conferences, a presence within state professional organizations, and more than 200 active teacher-consultants fuel our network’s growth. And yet, we still hear the “done the writing project” response when we introduce our site to teachers and administrators. It’s not our Texas style to withdraw, though, so ‘done the writing project’ is our starting bell, and as always, we’re ready.

LIZ STEPHENS is the director of the Central Texas Writing Project (Texas State University—San Marcos).

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Available at www.writingproject.org/Publications/books/index.html

Down, But Not Out

BY JUDITH MOORE KELLY

I could not speak when I received a call from Cynthia Henderson, inviting me to join the District of Columbia Area Writing Project.
(DCAWP) Project Outreach Network team. I was still speechless when, a week later, I received a call from Deborah Menkart asking me to consider applying for the DCAWP co-director position that would soon become available. Feeling sorry for myself, I was forced to use email to respond to both Cynthia and Deborah. That was 1996. My son chuckled at my ineptness but helped me email positive responses to both Cynthia and Deborah. Two weeks later I traveled to Princeton, New Jersey, with the DCAWP Project Outreach team and four weeks later, as I became co-director of DCAWP, I was just beginning to regain my voice. Thus began an interesting year for DCAWP with different teacher-consultant voices helping my often-unintelligible voice. In this unique fashion, DCAWP bonded.

Before my first year was up, however, I learned that the site was in financial trouble. How could that be? With only two summer institutes under our belt, how could we be broke? Would DCAWP go under? At the end of the third summer institute, some of our supporters recommended that we cancel the fourth summer institute and try again in 1999.

“Absolutely not!” I said. “The summer institute is the heart of DCAWP. Without a summer institute, we would suffer irreparable harm.”

Disheartened but determined, I sought and received lots of help and support from the teacher-consultants. We were down but not out! The 1998 summer institute was a success. It proved to us (and lots of others) that we could make it in spite of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles.

Despite a successful summer, 1998 did not end our financial woes. We still have them and probably will for the foreseeable future. Yet we are strong because of the high level of commitment of our teacher-consultants. Our perseverance is nothing less than phenomenal, and as we approach ten years, our motto is even more prophetic: “We will not just survive; we will thrive.”

JUDITH MOORE KELLY is the director of the District of Columbia Area Writing Project (Howard University). She attended the first DCAWP Summer Institute in 1995.

References