The E-Anthology: A Catalyst for Professional Writing?

by Shirley Brown

As a former teacher (now retired) and one of the original developers of the National Writing Project E-Anthology: Summer Institute Writings and Conversations, I remain committed to a specific goal for NWP’s online writing conference, a goal that has not been fully realized. My goal is to have this cyberspace conversation serve as a gateway to writing about professional concerns. In 1997, while driving to an NWP Electronic Design Team retreat in Flagstaff, Arizona, I launched into what would be the first—but not last—description of my “great” idea for the E-Anthology.

“In addition to having a forum for any and all kinds of writing,” I described for the Design Team members in the car, “wouldn’t having an area called Hot Topics for controversial and critical educational topics be a good idea?” I just knew that other teachers were itching to have their views on educational policies heard, that they wanted to talk across writing project sites about the political nature of teaching, and that the next logical step for anything they posted about classroom issues would be an article in a professional journal. Quite a leap, I admit.

No one seemed to disagree, and Hot Topics went up on the E-Anthology site with an explanation.

See The E-Anthology, page 16
that it was a place to "talk" (write) about classroom issues. Because violence involving school-aged students was dominating the news at the time, we posted a quote from Geoffrey Canada's *Fist Stick Knife Gun* to generate conversation and writing. Canada, as his book's title signals, makes the point that the nature of violence has shifted dramatically. At one time fistfights and some bruises or broken bones characterized violence in society and schools. Over time, violence moved to using sticks, then knives, and finally guns. With guns, the result of violent conflict is likely to be death. Canada never predicted anything as dire as the Columbine shootings, but we can see how the shootings confirmed his observations in a horrifying way. The quote generated some discussion, but the response could hardly be described as the flood I had anticipated. I had assumed that large numbers of teachers were eager for an opportunity and place to share perspectives about violence-related classroom issues, but that was not the case.

I reasoned that perhaps the problem was with the quote we had chosen, so, after a while, we changed it, but our Hot Topics still didn't attract many postings. While the general posting area for poems, memoirs, and short fiction flourished, the forum for classroom issues languished and finally ground to a halt.

There were other attempts on the E-Anthology to invite perspectives on classroom issues. We tried posting professional articles and inviting discussion as well as adding a forum for teacher research. None of these efforts opened up the kinds of discussion that would lead to the professional writing that I imagined. Finally, in 2002, we dropped any attempt to have a separate forum for classroom issues. Instead, we made classroom issues one of the genres for writing posted on the more general Open Mic online forum.

I wish I could say that there was a subsequent groundswell demanding the return of a forum for the exclusive purpose of exchanging perspectives on the classroom. The groundswell never happened. In fact, in 2003, there were only 55 postings identified as classroom issues out of a total of more than 1,650 postings in Open Mic, a mere 4 percent. Curiously though, one of the most poignant pieces about a classroom was identified as a memoir, not a classroom issue. With this posting, I began to wonder if the resistance to writing about classroom concerns sprang from the label we had attached to it. Perhaps teachers were resisting characterizing stories about individual students or experiences in a classroom as "issues." The piece that set me thinking about this deals with a teacher's close observation of a special-needs child having difficulty learning to read and write. The teacher noticed that the child seemed to enjoy singing and used her observation as the way to teach the child how to spell her name. In "Angela," Wendy Warren, a teacher-consultant with the Montana Writing Project, writes:

I am encouraging her [Angela] to trace the letters. I take her hand, and guide the crayon over the A. Suddenly I am singing to the tune of "Bingo," "A-N-G-E-L-A, A-N-G-E-L-A, and Angela is her name-o." A huge grin spreads across Angela's face. We slowly begin to sing together.

Within a few days, we are tracing as we sing. In time, an A comes out of her pencil on its own. We have begun the baby step toward our goal. By the school year's end, Angela is writing her name. She is obviously proud. She glows in the praise she receives from other teachers and her parents.

I learned far more from Angela than she learned from me that year. This experience has impacted my teaching forever. I now struggle to teach classes of 28 students, trying to find their individual keys. Certainly, Angela was an exceptional child in many ways. And, in many ways, she is every child—searching for her voice. Waiting for someone to see her and help her learn in the way she needs to learn.

Isn't that episode as much about the teacher's practice of close observation as it is a memoir? But the fact that this piece was submitted as a memoir instead of a classroom issue made me wonder if there is a general perception that a classroom issue is something that is more removed, more generalized. What visions are conjured up by the term "issue?" Are people imitating dry, third-person papers that are so overgeneralized they connect to no one? Is the resistance a remnant of higher education courses that valued only impersonal writing?

Whatever the reason, my purpose in encouraging teachers to use the E-Anthology as a place for the exchange of observations, stories, and frustrations does not grow from a desire to provide a place to vent. Rather, I see the E-Anthology, in addition to a place for posting expressive pieces, as a potential collection point to identify issues and policies that interfere with effective classroom practices and student learning as well as to illuminate what success and learning look like.

The invitation for posting pieces on classroom issues remains a challenge as the E-Anthology has been integrated into more summer institutes. To adopt a popular metaphor, I think that, if sheer numbers tell a story, the 2003 E-Anthology has reached the tipping point, that place where an idea, a tool, a something, catches fire and becomes widely accepted and used. With over 1,600 postings and approximately 90 out of 175 sites participating, the E-Anthology has become a useful component of many summer institutes. And because the E-Anthology is closely related to the writing that occurs in summer institutes, the question of what participants write and post is a
National Writing Project Board of Directors

NWP Board of Directors members attending their June meeting included (from left) Richard Sterling, Augusta Souza Kappner, George Haley, Vanessa Whang, David Meyerowitz, Michele Drake, chair Dan Boggan, Jr., Denise Patmon, Donald McQuade, and Don Gallehr. (Not pictured here are Jim Gray and Ricardo Fernández)

Can the E-Anthology become a catalyst for professional writing? I continue to believe so, but the larger issue is the writing that occurs in summer institutes. Perhaps there are design features of the E-Anthology that should be revisited that would encourage more professional writing. Or maybe, as some have suggested to me, the E-Anthology is not the place for professional writing. But I can't accept this view. Let us work together to figure out how to reinforce teachers' sense of professionalism so that it includes professional writing.

References

Shirley Brown is a teacher-consultant with the Philadelphia Writing Project and a co-chair of the NWP Teacher Inquiry Communities Network. Both Brown and The Voice invite response to this article.

I Am Not Richard Rodriguez

continued from page 5

who succeed in a world that has no boundaries—usually speak more than one language. Students today should not have to give up what Richard Rodriguez gave up in order to be successful or to be deemed Americans. And so, con respeto, I am