Empowering Teachers Through the Summer Institute

by Beth Halbert

"Absolutely... it'll be fine... We've got it covered... If I need you, I've got your number. I'll talk to you at the beginning of next week. Bye."

As I hung up the kitchen telephone and walked toward the living room, I hoped I had sounded sincere. I sat down on the couch and put my head in my hands as the things that I should do first bounced off the walls of my brain like characters in the old Pong video game. Margrethe Ahlschwede, director of the West Tennessee Writing Project (WTWP), had just called to ask if I, along with the other members of the summer institute focal team, would take over the planning of the 2002 WTWP Summer Institute. Her husband was in a hospital 200 miles away from their home, and she would need to be there with him for several weeks. I did a mental calculation in my head. Several weeks meant three, and the summer institute was scheduled to begin in two.

Margrethe is more to me than just the director of my writing project site. She was my professor when I was in college. She is my mentor, and I consider her a very dear friend. Part of me had wanted to say to her, "No way. There's no way the summer institute can go on without you. You're the director. We need you there." But the other part of me had just assured her not to worry about a thing. Now the panic was setting in. In my eyes, the summer institute and Margrethe were irrevocably connected. It was her soft voice that led us in reflection in the afternoons. Who would do that now? It was her affirmations that made teachers feel so important and valuable. How would we be able to convey that like she could?

The West Tennessee Writing Project is located on the campus of the University of Tennessee (UT) at Martin about two hundred miles from Nashville and one hundred and fifty miles from Memphis. People in this rural Tennessee region grow corn and soybeans. In fact, the Soybean Festival is held in Martin every year, and the Soybean Queen is crowned there. There are 11 restaurants, one grocery store, and a Wal-Mart in Martin. The campus is small and quiet with green everywhere. Most of the buildings on campus are arranged in a rectangle around an area scattered with benches, huge trees of every variety, and flowers. It would be hard to walk from one end of the quad to another without walking beneath a shade tree.

I graduated from UT Martin in 1999, ready and eager to begin teaching English to high school students in middle Tennessee. I had no idea how little I actually knew about teaching. But, after a few weeks in the classroom, I found out. I needed help, and in March I gratefully accepted the invitation to participate in my first summer institute. The writing project and I were a good fit and, for the next two summers, I was asked to serve in teacher-leader roles. But I have never been comfortable with the role of "leader." I am much more comfortable as a follower, a participant. In meetings, Margrethe, in her quiet way, was always telling us that we should speak up more. She would say, "I feel as if I am bringing all of the ideas here and you all are just nodding your heads in agreement. I would like to hear from you all more." We would all look at her and nod our heads in agreement.

After my conversation with Margrethe on the phone, I ran upstairs and grabbed two navy blue, four-inch thick notebooks. The two notebooks bulged with copies of minutes, teaching demonstrations, writing that I had read aloud to my writing response group, and pages of reflections, all from the summer institutes of 2000 and 2001. I also grabbed a much slimmer brand new blue notebook that I was planning to fill with information during the 2002 summer institute. I carried these notebooks and a yellow legal pad downstairs and began making a list. There is comfort in a list.

I talked constantly over the next two weeks with Molly Coffman, Lee Hudson, and Lana Warren, my colleagues on the summer institute focal team, "SIFTers" we called ourselves. The 2002 participants had already met together once in May for an immersion day. This is a day when we go through a typical day of the institute, hand out materials, and talk about what will happen. We contacted the participants to check in with them about their upcoming demonstrations and ask them how things were going with the piece of writing they knew they would need to bring to the first day of the institute. Our team met one Saturday in Jackson, Tennessee, at the Davis-Kidd bookstore to make a schedule for the four weeks. We figured out the logistics of the institute: how to get the classroom door unlocked, how to mail parking passes, how to use the computer labs on campus. And that was for starters. These are the details Margrethe had always taken care of. But as the first day of the institute approached, I worried less about the details of the institute—those had pretty much been taken care of. I worried more about the tone of the institute and how different it would be without Margrethe's gentle nudging. I worried that we wouldn't be able to get the point across that writing will improve as writing instruction improves and that a teacher of writing also must be a writer. I worried we wouldn't have those grand "ahh!" moments that we had all experienced when we first participated in the institute with Margrethe.

On the night before our first meeting, I made a list in my journal of the worst possible things that could happen the next day. I believe that if one figures out the worst possibilities, then anything has to be better than that. So I wrote in my journal, "Worst case scenarios:
1) People don't show up. I can't do anything about that. I will call them after the day is over and see what's up; 2) People don't talk. Molly, Lana, and Lee will take care of that; 3) Someone asks a question I can't answer. I will say, I can't answer that."

On that first day, I arrived at Room 219 in Brehm Hall 45 minutes early. Room 219 is actually a laboratory. Tables and black rolling chairs fill the middle of the room; along the walls are cabinets, sinks, and two huge contraptions that look like industrial pizza ovens. Nothing decorates the walls but a photo of the UT-Martin Beef Team and warning signs about the dangers of natural gas. It's an odd place for 15 teachers to meet and talk about writing, but it has worked for us before.

The teachers, who teach kindergarten to college, began arriving and things started moving. Lana read the minutes from the immersion day back in May, but, of course, these were no ordinary minutes. In her minutes, Lana had Spiderman looking in on us as we met, modeling the kind of creativity that would be at the core of the institute. As the institute progressed, we would take turns keeping and reading the minutes. They were almost always funny.

Mary Lou Marks, former co-director of the West Tennessee Writing Project, started us off on day one with a model demonstration. We used hats to write a character sketch. We did prewriting and shared in a very nonthreatening way. We began writing the first scene of the short story in which this character might appear. The new participants asked the right challenging questions after the demonstration. "What does this have to do with standards?" "When do you go over the rubric with your students?" Doug, the college professor, asked, "Do you get a lot of questions about form?" Mary Lou had a whole list of standards met by this activity, and she answered the questions about rubric and form, placing them in the context of her demonstration. The teachers began making connections to their own classrooms. Ginny said, "You could do this with reading characters in a short story." "I could do this with fifth-graders," Lee announced.

After Mary Lou's demonstration, Lee, a fifth-grade teacher and returnee to the institute, gave a demonstration on literature circles. We all practiced literature circles just like Lee does them in her classroom. When the demonstration was over Doug, a professor of design, commented, "I have never experienced reading and writing as such a communal activity." He would later write in his weekly reflection, "I became involved in theater design because you get to be a part of a community. If I had known writing could be the same way, I would have started long ago."

I wanted to jump up and shout "hallelujah" at the end of that first day. The teachers were getting it. They understood what it was all about. It was amazing. How did it work without Margrethe there? It worked the same way it has worked for the past ten years. A group of teachers gets together. They read professional literature. They give demonstrations of their best teaching practices, and the other participants tell them what they are doing really well. For one time in their lives, teachers aren't told what they are doing wrong. They are affirmed and encouraged and shown new ways of working in their classrooms. They learn through writing for their writing response groups and through reading aloud that teachers of writing have to be writers themselves.

Don't get me wrong; things were not perfect. In my mind, though, perfect means the way Margrethe would have done it. For example, when Margrethe is there, everything runs right on time. We start at 9:00 A.M. sharp, break for lunch at 12:15 P.M., start again at 1:15 P.M., and end at 4:00 P.M. We didn't keep things running quite that smoothly. Even though I felt the conversations and discussions were meaningful, I still missed the way Margrethe seemed to be able to steer the conversation into important discussions about assessment, the culture of schools, the audience outside of the classroom, and valuing community rather than critique.

When Margrethe returned on Monday of the third week, the "real" institute didn't begin. The "real" institute had been going on for the past two weeks. She added a new and powerful voice to the group, and I celebrated her arrival immensely; but the teachers from all over west Tennessee had already begun to do what Richard Sterling says happens at these institutes. They had been allowed "to shape their ideas and think through the puzzle in their own practice with help from other expert teachers."

The summer institute, I learned, does not—should not—depend on the personality and wisdom of a single person. I recalled part of the reflection I wrote at the conclusion of our immersion day back in May. "The summer institute works because teachers teach teachers. It isn't one voice, but a community of voices, a dialogue."

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When Writing Gets Real

continued from page 17

without the structure of the classroom.

As for me, I've had the satisfaction of incorporating multiple English language arts standards into a single lesson which took only about three days. And, oh, yes. I got another letter from Ms. Axlerod—a duplicate. However many times she repeats herself though, I don't believe I will change my mind about helping students into writing that gets real.

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