Teaching After the Summer Institute

BY NICK MANENO

Immediately following my participation in the Northern Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute, I set up a meeting with my school administrators to share the potency of this learning experience. Specifically, I told them how the writing project is predicated upon teachers teaching teachers and that, by virtue of this fact, the quality of the summer institute’s writing presentations was elevated because these presenters were professionals in the field, sharing their expertise from firsthand knowledge.

I shared with my administration the 23 handouts from the 23 presentations in which I participated. I explained that I now knew what it must feel like whenever we ask students to write. Writing is work—a labor really. I told my principals that the intellectual and professional growth that I made during the institute was greater than the sum total of all of my professional development over the past four years.

Both of my administrators were hooked by my enthusiasm, so I made my proposition: Make every other staff meeting an in-house best practices inservice worth staff development points. My principals smiled, so I continued with another idea. I envisioned our staff, on a voluntary basis, going to one another’s classrooms to live as our students do by experiencing an interactive presentation on, not just writing, but science experiments, cooperative groups, learning math through a center approach—you name it.

Imagine my surprise when my principal said that she had envisioned the same thing and that we would make this innovative professional development a reality at our school. I was giddy. My high did not last long, however, because the fact is that, although we do have an inservice every-other staff meeting, not one of these sessions has been on best practices. Instead, I have been reminded how to fill out special education forms, write lesson plans in diverse ways and . . . I wish I could remember more, but these inservices obviously have had no effect on me. And, as a teacher, I have yet to be a student in another teacher’s classroom, learning accomplished teaching practices firsthand.

Nevertheless, the teachers-teaching-teachers ball has begun rolling at our school, if very slowly. Nine weeks into this school year, my assistant principal asked me if I would co-teach a writing inservice for our staff. Of course I said yes and became excited as I ran through a list of presentations that I could do: one of my own or perhaps one of 23 other provocative writing presentations from the summer institute. I decided that I would put my own spin on Ira Progoff’s intensive journals. Teacher-Consultant Vic Kryston had facilitated an emotionally charged presentation utilizing this intensive journaling during the summer institute where I was a participant. I came into the summer institute with strong ideas about the teaching of writing, a track record of enabling children to grow as writers and writing my own original works. Nevertheless, using journaling techniques of Progoff, Vic allowed me to explore autobiographical subject matter that I had previously avoided writing about.

Moreover, I watched my colleagues writing with feverish intensity. We listened intently and responded emotionally as several shared their writing. It was only our third day together, and during this presentation, we became a community of learners and writers who trusted one another. I witnessed three teachers become writers that day . . . I saw it in their eyes when they realized that what they wrote was powerful and too good to keep to themselves. I wanted to be a part of that same feeling again, only this time at my school, and so, in the end, I combined elements of Progoff with elements from two other presentations.

I approached my assistant principal, barely able to contain my enthusiasm, which I noticed was not contagious. It seemed that she had wanted me to talk about how to use a rubric to grade the three domains of writing (composing, expressing, and mechanics), schoolwide editing marks, and writing from a prompt, because these are the areas used to assess fourth and fifth grade writing on high-stakes state tests. To say the least, I was frustrated, and as I left her office, I remember muttering to myself that the three domains,
Teaching After the Summer Institute

continued from page 14

editing marks, and prompts are worthless unless people write to begin with.

Teachers who have had experiences like the summer institute often find themselves explaining the benefits of student-constructed knowledge over teacher-directed practice, word study over traditional spelling lists, cooperative work over isolated practice.

But when I talk about writing practices with my teaching team, administration, and most teachers, they are often not able to transcend rubrics, writing prompts, and the mechanics of writing. For many parents, writing and spelling are synonymous. After the summer institute, after growing as a writer and a writing teacher, I find myself in the difficult position of being at odds with many people with whom I work. This bothers me, especially when we have the same goal—to provide the children we teach with the best education possible. However, I believe I understand the root of our differences. If I did not write, it would never occur to me to teach paragraph writing as anything other than a five-sentence formula in the shape of a hamburger. It would never occur to me not to extend this recipe to a five-paragraph essay. It is because I write that I know that this heavy-handed structure stifles creativity and limits thinking, putting form above all else. For me, the hamburger paragraph and five-paragraph essay are specific genres that I will teach my students, but we will call it “learning to take a writing test” and it will not dominate our year as it does in so many other classrooms.

This is a year of change, in that I am refining and reflecting upon the way I teach writing. I am more thoughtful in articulating why I am teaching the lessons that I do. I am using elements from all of the presentations in which I participated this past July. Somehow, I will bring pieces of the summer institute to the rest of my school. I cannot do this in a heavy-handed way, hitting teachers over the head with my writing project club. Rather, I must maintain an open classroom where visitors are welcome, keep a portfolio that illustrates students’ writing growth, and instead of talking about the domains of writing and editing, enable my colleagues to live as their students do by introducing them to the principles of the Progoft journaling workshop, and the writing and sharing of their work. It is only by writing first that one can eventually become an accomplished writing teacher.

NICK MANNING, a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project, teaches third grade at Old Bridge School Elementary School, Prince William County, Virginia.