NWP E-Anthology: “Strangers” Talk About Writing

The following article offers an in-depth look at the National Writing Project E-Anthology, an online publication and response forum offered to writing project summer-institute participants each year. Here, E-Anthology facilitator Peter Booth and participant Beverly Guillory discuss the process from very different perspectives: one as author and one as responder.

by Peter Booth and Beverly Simon Guillory

From Peter Booth

The summer of 2002 marked the sixth summer in which the NWP E-Anthology was available as a resource to teacher-consultants involved in summer institutes. Three years ago when I became a teacher-consultant with the National Writing Project in Vermont, Tish McGonegal, the site’s director, pushed me in the direction of the E-Anthology. As a first-time user, I saw the potential it held as a summer institute tool. Through cyberspace, teacher-consultants were able to connect, share ideas, and get feedback from their peers throughout the entire NWP network of sites. It seemed like a great stepping stone between publishing locally within an individual site’s community and moving out to publishing more publicly for strangers.

I must admit that I also had some misgivings. Would the Internet, a typically removed forum for interaction, allow for a passionate, meaningful dialogue around a piece of writing? Could a significantly long piece be read and productively critiqued online? Why would anyone in cyberland be willing to devote their time to giving constructive criticism to a piece of writing by a complete stranger?

Two summers later, after expressing my thoughts about the potential for the E-Anthology, I was asked to join the E-Anthology’s “E-Team,” eight teacher-consultants who were asked to facilitate the E-Anthology by reading and responding to writing from teachers throughout the country. Suddenly, I had become one of those people giving constructive criticism to strangers. This experience was at once daunting and exhilarating. The daunting part was trying to find time every day to read and respond to as many pieces as possible. The goal of the team was to be sure that every post by a writer received feedback within 24 hours, but many days, getting myself to the computer was a challenge. After all, as I had once wondered, why would I give up my time to help complete strangers? What was in it for me?

However, inevitably, every day held at least one moment of online interaction that made me come back the next day.

Perhaps the most personally rewarding part of working on the E-Team was that the feedback that I posted in response to a piece of writing was always listened to, considered, and in many cases incorporated into the next draft, which often appeared on the E-Anthology within a few days. This was teaching at its best: My feedback was heard, valued, and put to work. Unlike my classroom where my comments so often elicit the dreadful mean of “Does this mean I have to do another draft?” here writers wanted to hear from me.

The conversation between Beverly Guillory and members of the E-Team regarding her piece “Bad to the Bone” is a wonderful example of the potential the E-Anthology holds for writers.

Over the course of four days (July 22 to July 25), Bev posted three complete drafts of her piece. (See figures 1 and 2 to see the first and final drafts of the poem.)

The first draft, posted on July 22, was essentially a character sketch of a Vietnam War veteran. The piece was raw, and the character’s pain was right at the poem’s surface. Bev used short, chopped phrases that conveyed both the pain and the “edge” of her character. “With body and psyche scarred/you keep on hanging in, hanging on/and hanging out.” The portrait she painted was carefully crafted and both beautiful and abrasive at the same time. The feedback she received said as much. Responders asked Bev to enlarge the piece to “give [the reader] a context for the whole piece.”

Within a day of her first posting, Bev had a second draft online. This draft, more than twice as long as the first, began to fill in some of the background of the character she was developing. Again she received feedback from four members of the E-Team, this time with ideas for specific parts of the poem. Suggestions were made for rethinking the last stanza, continuing to flesh out the character, and being sure to “carry the reader” from Vietnam back to the United States as the poem moved back and forth with its imagery.

Two days later, Bev posted a third draft. By this time, the poem had grown to 15 stanzas and had evolved into something that concisely captured the effects that the Vietnam War had on the poem’s character and also seemed to touch upon the effects war had on our nation as a whole.

Thinking back over the course of the summer E-Anthology, the dialogue that took place around “Bad to the Bone” stands out as an example of what the E-Anthology can be. Although I was initially skeptical of publishing work online and entering into a dialogue with strangers about writing, I’ve come to realize that what makes the E-Anthology a vital tool is that it brings together people who share a common passion, and, through technology, it allows connections and conversations that, perhaps, would not have occurred otherwise. The E-Anthology has expanded our notion of our “writing community,” making it more than just our writing groups at our individual NWP sites. It has created a network of people who are willing to devote at least a few minutes of their time to give helpful feedback to strangers, who, by the

Bad to the Bone

by Beverly Guillory

Abandoned in childhood, draped in cobwebs of Spanish moss, and the joie de vivre of Acadiana you rebelled. Death wish in hand you pulled back-to-back tours in Viet-Nam. With body and psyche scarred, you keep on hanging in, hanging on and hanging out.

From Wyoming and Montana the mountains, the streams, the wolves and loons beckon to you, a mountain man like Jeremiah Johnson, survival knife in hand, riding in search of another time, another place trying to make sense of it all.

Figure 1—First draft, July 22, 2002
end of the process, are far from "complete strangers."

From Beverly Guillory

Before the summer of 2002, I was not a writer. I knew this from the multitude of unsatisfactory grades my college writing assignments received. So, it was with great trepidation that I succumbed to my colleague's urging to apply to the National Writing Project of Acadia Summer Institute. This was the best thing I've ever done for myself.

The institute's user-friendly environment allowed me to trip, fall, and eventually develop into a writer. In spite of my newly found confidence in the process, however, I was not eager to post anything to the E-Anthology. I felt that my writings were too mundane, not deep enough, or just plain rambling. I did, however, read the postings of others almost daily. What impressed me most about the E-Anthology postings was the specificity of the comments made by the facilitators known as the E-Team.

At the end of the summer institute, I summoned the courage to post a few of my completed poems. I was thrilled to receive complimentary remarks and workable suggestions for clarifying language or imagery in each of the pieces. And I loved the anonymity of the process. The responders didn't know me, and I didn't know them. My attitude was that they were there to help me, and I wouldn't take it personally if they didn't like my choice of words. So I took a risk and posted a character sketch that no one had seen.

This was "Bad to the Bone," a poem about a Vietnam War veteran who is an important part of my life. I had lived through the era, but it had never affected me personally. Now, all these years later, I was being affected by the war. I based the poem on conversations we'd had and what little background information I knew. I didn't know where I was going with the poem or really what I wanted to say with it. I just threw it out there hoping someone would rescue me.

Along came Peter Booth, Mary-Lynne Monroe, and Shari Williams, who were all members of the E-Team. The feedback I received after the first posting gave me some direction. Mostly they wanted to know more. After the second posting, the responders still wanted more.

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**Bad to the Bone**

**By Beverly Guillory**

Abandoned in childhood you rebelled.

Nineteen and immortal
death wish in hand
you pulled back-to-back
tours in Vietnam.

There was nothing
to come home to.
Sure, your grandparents cared.
Yes, they loved you.
Yes, they were concerned.
It was not reason enough
to come home.

"No news is good news," you opined.
Exasperated, your C.O. barked,
"Write home or walk point!"

Search and destroy.
Every night you walked point.
Search and destroy.
Kill. Kill. Kill.

The morning mist was rising.
Death followed you around.
You fight like Rambo,
a suicide refusing to die.
A coldness creeps over you
numbing your heart.

The stench of death
gugs you
twists your insides.
You feel yourself losing it.
Kill. Kill. Kill.
There's no such thing
as murder in war.

Your heart is in your mouth.
Who's gonna reprimand
a crazy man?
You've been wack all your life
even before Vietnam.

Body and psyche scarred
you're sent home
only to be spat on
by an ungrateful country
fighting the war, safe,
on the evening news.

Depression
shadows your every move.
Just when you think
you're O.K.
you let down your guard.
Here come the boys
from Vietnam.

They sit on your bed
when you're wide awake.
"Go away, leave me alone!"
Relieve me of my pain.
Sometimes I wish I were dead."

It's a lonely road
that can't be shared.
You try to talk
about the war,
but no sound comes out.

There it goes again
flickering through your mind.
It's not going to go away.

No one can help you.
Your mind...
refuses...
to share it...
even with you.

You suffer alone.
The pain is only yours.
You carry a gun
wherever you go.
You're not yet
counted among the dead.

From Wyoming and Montana
the mountains, the streams,
the wolves and the loons beckon you.
A mountain man wanna be
like Jeremiah Johnson
survival knife in hand
the thirst for life
in your veins
riding in search of a fresh start...
just you against nature.

A disordered human
in a disordered world
grieving but not guilt-ridden
sad but not ashamed.
You didn't die.
You're a survivor.
You're gonna keep hanging in
hanging on
and hanging out.
information—information I did not have from personal knowledge. I realized I needed to do research to fill in the gaps.

Going online, I learned more about the Vietnam War. While searching for insight into a soldier “walking point” [see figure 2], I came across “The Survivor,” a poem by Michael E. Dingwell. My connection with this poem led me to a level of specificity I had not previously achieved. Now I had direction. As I continued my research, I lifted words and phrases from Vietnam veterans who described their war experiences in online forums. Then I went back to the poem and rewrote it, using the knowledge I had acquired through the research and working in the “found” words for an authentic feel.

Anne Lamott once said, “Very few writers really know what they are doing until they’ve done it.” I didn’t know I had “done it” until the E-Team told me I had. I’m still high; validation like that is worth more than gold.

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E-Anthology: Summer Institute Writings and Conversations

Every summer, writing project sites are invited to participate in the National Writing Project E-Anthology: Summer Institute Writings and Conversations. The E-Anthology is an online forum in which NWP summer institute participants are invited to publish writings and reflections from and about their summer institute experiences. Facilitated by experienced writing project teacher-consultants from around the country, the forum runs from June through August. Site sign-up begins in May. Highlights from the 2001 and 2002 E-Anthology projects are online at www.writingproject.org/Programs/online/eanth/