Satellite Sites Overcome Distance Barriers in West Virginia

by Laura Tracy Baisden

Staying connected over great distances is certainly one of the biggest problems facing rural writing project sites. This is typical to sites situated in the Appalachian Mountains, where the word rural conjures images of isolated communities separated by long distances. For rural writing project sites in West Virginia, however, while staying connected is certainly a huge problem, it is not for the reason of separation by great distance. Rather, in West Virginia, the word rural applies to small communities located fairly close together but separated by the geographic barriers of the Appalachian Mountains.

West Virginia is the only state to lie completely within the Appalachians, and for us, the mountains create a geographic obstacle course to getting almost anywhere. In Logan County, where I teach, it's not uncommon to find a student from Logan who has never met a student from the nearby Man School District or even been to the town of Man. Although these areas are separated by only 12 miles, those 12 miles are winding, twisting mountain roads on which accidents and fatalities frequently occur.

From Logan County, the trip to the Marshall University Writing Project in Huntington is a 140-mile, four-hour round-trip. For our teachers, traveling this distance to attend writing project sessions was prohibitive, limiting our ability to participate. We wanted to attend, but who could make such a drive to attend an after-school continuity or inservice session? Over the years, only three Logan County teachers had traveled to Marshall University to attend a writing project summer institute there. The county's other 14 teachers had attended a summer institute when the institute had come to us—a venture tried first by the West Virginia Writing Project (now the Central West Virginia Writing Project) and then by the Marshall University Writing Project. This summer institute at a distance marked the beginnings of a satellite site.

A Case for a Satellite Site

Marshall University Writing Project Director Dolores Johnson first proposed the idea of a satellite site to a group of Logan County teachers at a site retreat in 1998. Our first question was, "What is a satellite site?" As Dolores described it, a satellite site is an offshoot of the larger university site. As an affiliate of the university site, a satellite site can provide summer institutes and continuity sessions, but since it wouldn't be a full site, it wouldn't need office space. The programs for this satellite site, she continued, would be designed in collaboration between the established site's director (Dolores), the satellite site director (me), and an advisory group made up of teacher-consultants from both locations.

The idea sounded perfect. We had been badgering Dolores to bring the summer institute back to Logan County. We had recruited nearly two dozen teachers who wanted to attend the summer institute provided they didn't have to drive to Marshall University in Huntington every day. And—as we were not surprised to find out—Dolores and the summer institute directors didn't want to spend every day of a four-week institute making that drive either. All in all, the idea of developing a satellite site for Logan County—a place where teachers could participate in writing project continuity and summer institutes locally—seemed a workable solution to a problem that had appeared unsolvable.

For us, a satellite site would be a smaller version of the university site, but we were faced with a number of questions as we began thinking about the prospect. What are the components of a satellite site? What types of programs should be offered? For the Marshall University Writing Project and the Logan County satellite site, the answers to those questions resided in the model of the National Writing Project itself—development begins as a grassroots effort. From out of the existing 17 teacher-consultants, a core group of teachers took hold of the satellite site idea, envisioning and creating it.

Three Components Important to Building a Satellite Site

In retrospect, the leadership group was one of the three components we found effective in developing our vision of a satellite site: leadership from local, committed teachers; a relationship with our county school system; and the use of technology for communication. The interaction of these three components, along with a clear connection to the main Marshall University Writing Project site, has helped our satellite thrive.

As the first component in developing the satellite site, the leadership of local, committed teacher-consultants was incredibly important. Our experience tells us that development of a satellite comes first from teachers who have had time to grow in the project and who have a
desire for sustained involvement with the workings of the site. Paula White, Mary Hawkins, Jane Long, and I were teacher-consultants who had experienced various opportunities within the National Writing Project. Three of us—Paula, Mary, and I—had attended two or more summer institutes. As well, Paula had worked in conjunction with the co-directors of the summer institute that the West Virginia Writing Project had hosted in the county, Jane had worked with the Marshall University Writing Project advisory council, and I had both received a rural sites minigrant to research teacher histories in the county and attended an NWP Annual Meeting.

Over several years of active participation, the four of us had delved into many areas of the site work. We had learned about positive and negative issues facing site directors and advisory boards. As we helped Dolores plan and guide a summer institute, we had learned about the financial issues with which a site must deal. On top of this, in designing and implementing several inservice sessions for our local school district, we had also gained experience as teachers of teachers. This allowed us to develop a level of confidence in working with other teachers. Mary and I developed inservice programs focused on poetry writing in celebration of National Poetry Month. Paula had overseen a one-day writing-across-the-curriculum workshop for back-to-school inservice that employed writing project teacher-consultants as facilitators. All in all, because we were allowed to grow in our work, we felt committed to and empowered by the writing project. So by the time the idea of a satellite site occurred, we were a group of teachers who felt comfortable in undertaking more responsibility for the direction of a site.
The second component in establishing a successful satellite site was developing a strong relationship with our county school system and helping our administrators understand the importance of sustained, long-term teacher development so they would help fund the partnership we envisioned. Especially beneficial in fostering this relationship was creating quality programs for students that our county was interested in developing, thus demonstrating how the work of the writing project directly impacts students. Before the satellite site was envisioned, Mary and I developed a summer creative writing camp program for students in the seventh through twelfth grades. The county school system was pleased with the program, which allowed 25 students to spend a week together developing their writing voices. It was a program designed for summer enrichment (as opposed to remediation), which was an area that the school system needed. Through this program, county personnel could tangibly see that the writing project directly impacts student learning.

The school system staff was also pleased with the level of teacher leadership being developed through participation in writing project programs. The inservice sessions that we designed in cooperation with the county staff development council were well received. The sessions were based locally, with long-term commitments as opposed to one-shot inservices, and inexpensive in comparison to the training from "outside" experts. This relationship was important to our advisory board because we wanted the county to view us as a local professional resource for staff development that can be called upon to develop quality programs for local teachers, students, and parents.

The third and final component we found to be important was the use of technology for communication. LISTSERVS, MOOs (online, real-time discussions similar to chat rooms), and email have all helped sustain the work of the site, allowing us to feel connected to our colleagues who seem so physically distant from us. And as our increased number of active teacher-consultants also began to see the benefits of technology, we changed the way we handled a number of matters. For example, we now hold joint advisory board meetings online, and we plan county inservices, continuity sessions, and programs such as our fall retreat through electronic meetings. We send drafts of writing electronically for response-group feedback. The good news is that without the pressure of that four-hour drive, teacher-

consultant involvement has increased. Further, by interspersing our face-to-face meetings with online gatherings, we have increased both our contact time and the quality of that time.

**Building a Site, "Warts and All"**

While implementation of the Logan County satellite site has been fairly smooth, it hasn't been entirely easy. Many of the things that we feel have led to our success have also occasionally been sources of problems. In such a decidedly small rural area, for example, the pool from which we draw teachers is small, which sometimes affects the recruitment numbers for the summer institute and other programs.

As well, the area's limited pool of teachers means the writing project site's resources are limited as well, and we have had to avoid stretching those resources beyond our limits. While the active teacher-consultant core is growing, we have to carefully plan for the future to ensure that those teachers working in the programs don't burn out. Because the satellite site leadership council can see many opportunities for growth, we've had to learn to prioritize and limit our choices to those we have the personnel to implement. For instance, we see a need in our county for the development of literacy programs for teachers in prekindergarten through second grade, but we don't have teacher-consultants who are ready to undertake developing that program yet. We are hopeful though that a few of our teacher-consultants from this curricular area will continue to be involved in the work of the site, allowing them to develop a sense of empowerment to develop a program.

The Logan County satellite site of the Marshall University Writing Project is now four years old. Our annual commitment to Logan County Schools, with whom we partner, is to provide:

- an invitational summer institute for up to 15 teachers
- a series of nine staff development inservices focusing on writing across the curriculum for teachers and support staff such as classroom aids
- a week-long creative writing camp for students in the seventh through ninth grades; a two-week creative writing camp for students in the tenth through twelfth grades; and a weekend creative writing camp for students in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades
- a monthly book club with meetings open to all members of the community.

We're active in the county now and have plans for further growth. Among other ideas, we would like to develop a writing-for-college program for high school students and a bimonthly writers group for our teacher-consultants. We are also planning an advanced institute to be held locally, which will focus on teacher inquiry.

We believe the story of how we developed a satellite site is important because it can help other rural sites find ways of connecting teachers who are separated from the site and each other by distance, geography, or other factors. And while we don't believe that ours is the only model of what a satellite site can look like, we believe it's important to talk about this model if only to show others one way that it can be done.

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