Through the Looking Glass

A Site Director “Visits” Sites at the Annual Review

by Tish McGonigal.

For each of the last 12 years, members of the National Writing Project staff and a group of experienced site directors have gathered for the annual review of applications for federal funding. This year, the review was held February 7-9 at the University of California, Berkeley, the home base of the writing project. This review, however, was different: I was one of the reviewers.

Every fall, I, like other NWP directors, have begun the self-study and accounting we call the continuation proposal—a rigorous but not unpleasant task that serves an important purpose. It enables us to take a careful look at our sites, examining every aspect of the model originally shaped by NWP pioneer Jinne Gray. Is it fun? Not really. Is it useful? Yes. Forced to confront our challenges, we do something we often ask our students to do: we write to report what has happened while we worked on something, to reflect on what it all meant, and to project our plans, our hopes, and our visions for the future.

But until I had the chance to review these applications myself, I was never exactly sure what happened to mine after I put it in the mailbox. In my first years as a site director, I envisioned a group of formally dressed people sitting around my proposal with a fine-tooth comb in one hand and a magnifying glass in the other, measuring my work carefully against the model. Votes would be taken on our eligibility for continued funding, and notions made on how far we had fallen short of the ideal with our summer institute, our inservice program, the handling of our site's budget, and continuity (whatever that was).

The reality of the event known as the site review is utterly different from this scenario. The scrutiny happens, but instead of some kind of jury passing sentence on each application, picture instead a bunch of your colleagues sympathetically and constructively engaged with your proposal. Further, at the risk of, as someone said, talking about a great party to which you didn't get invited, here's a snapshot by an eyewitness reader.

The logistics of the site review are daunting. This year, 175 sites applied for continued funding, each of them submitting their budget, their narrative, and earlier in the fall, data that also tells their story: What was your institute like? What's going on with your inservice work? How did you spend your time, your money? Our report from the National Writing Project in Vermont—budget plus narrative plus numerical data—was probably about 40 pages long this year. That's a lot of material to study. Who can process all this information? And who would know how to respond to it?

Well, thought the NWP leadership, who better than the directors themselves? Ask the people who wrote those proposals to read them, process them, and respond to them. How would that work? The site director-reviewers would be encouraged to think of the review response as a process parallel to the ways we respond to each other's writing in the summer institute and the ways we ask our students to respond to one another. Let's recognize strengths and celebrate them. Let's be honest about challenges and problems, not in a mean-spirited way, but in supportive ways that link people to resources that can help them.

The site review this year began on a sunny, warm (well, warm by Vermont standards) morning in Berkeley, California. Aware that some of us traveled far and late, the planners scheduled our opening session for 11 A.M. This gave me time to cruise the streets and campus paths, torn between missing home and planning relocation to California. The meeting room in which we began was humming with energy and upbeat talk as I entered. There were about 40 people inside, and I knew some of them from annual meetings and network publications: national directors, staff people, other site directors, and NWP Task Force members. People greeted each other warmly, doing lots of joking and laughing. Outside, the California sun was shining off the Berkeley gardens around the university's faculty club. Rareified air, I thought to myself. We were welcomed by the coordinators, who set the tone for us: Try to visit a site as you read each proposal. Get inside that site and look around.

An hour later, after lunch, in another room with a quieter but similar ambiance, we started our visits. Nobody was talking much now. We were caught up in an environment of intense reading and rigorous thinking—a library reading room ethos. The atmosphere of concentrated work continued for two solid days, with time out for food, small conferences, walks, and sleep.

If collegiality is what NWP is after, it makes sense to clump readers with proposals they have something in common with. Thus, I was placed at a table of rural site people. Our table leader, NWP Co-director Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, gave us a careful and brisk orientation as we reviewed a “practice” proposal together. “Let's look at the Inverness Research data first,” she suggested. That's the numerical information each site submits for number crunching by Inverness Research Associates, NWP's evaluators. How many people attended your invited institute? What was the total number of contact hours represented by your continuity programs? Looking at these numbers, Elyse asked more questions. What questions does this information raise? What are we seeing there? What do we wonder?

By this time, most of us had wondered a lot, so we were hungry to read the narrative section of the proposal where some of our questions might be answered. As we discussed the practice proposal, Elyse modeled the kind of discourse we would hear throughout the weekend. If there were issues the site faced, we did not get out our calculators and begin subtracting hunks of the grant. Instead, we searched for ideas or people who could act as models or support for this site.

Then Elyse gave us each a proposal of our own, and, as I dug in, I was struck once again by the parallels NWP shows me between work that we do as adults within NWP and the kinds of work I wish for my students. This is a real literacy challenge, calling up all my higher order reading skills: absorbing, generalizing, inferring, diagnosing, problem-solving. As I looked across the report, I tried to visit this place, a wonderful site in eastern Wisconsin. Writing the response, I pulled up many of the writing skills I try to use and teach; I was going here for articulate, specific, honest feedback. I imagined the directors, looking back and looking ahead, clicking out this story of their site for me, maybe working, as I always do, too close to the deadline, with Christmas, or vacation, or the flu, or children crowding their computers and their psyches. In drafting my response, I was able to draw on
models of response letters written by previous reviewers of that site. I was now a participant in their conversations.

As the site review went on, I visited several sites that generated in me the same feeling of awe, interest, and admiration I had felt for the Wisconsin site. In their own corner of NWP all these directors and teacher-consultants were carrying on the NWP mission.

Returning home, I had an airport conversation with Karen McComas, a co-director of the Marshall University Writing Project. She was talking about how early in their experience some site directors think of the summer institute fellows as “students” and, over time, grow to see them as colleagues. The site review has led me into a similar paradigm shift. Here, you don’t sit on a panel of judges. You get yet another chance to work and grow and learn from the stories and feedback of colleagues, another chance to see the scope and the possibilities of our work in the project. If you ever get invited to this party, go.

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