Profesional Writing Retreats Annual Report 2007-2008

Submitted by Coordinator Rebeca García González

Summary of the Year’s Work

In the 2007-2008 period the Professional Writing Retreats (PWR) underwent significant changes in leadership and design. During her first year as coordinator for the program, Rebeca García González oversaw the successful merging of Professional Writing Retreats A and B, which served 28 writers from 26 writing project sites across the country.

Activities and accomplishments in 2007-2008

August 2007 Reviewed debriefings and evaluations; planning for the year

September 2007 Reviewed final minigrant reports

October 2007 Sent message to site directors in cities with diverse populations, asking for retreat participant nominees

November 2007 Annual Meeting site development workshop, Integrating Professional Writing into the Core Work of the Site, conducted by retreat facilitators

January 2008 Planning session with all the retreat facilitators, held in Scottsdale, AZ, addressed the merge of Retreats A & B

April 2008 Selection process for both retreats

April–July 2008 “Programs in action” writers for the NWP website selected and coached

May 2008 Annual Meeting workshop panelist selection (based on final minigrant reports)

June 2008 28 participants attended Writing Retreats A and B, held concurrently at Sunrise Springs Retreat Center, Santa Fe, NM

July 2008 Retreat evaluation review and debriefing
September–Oct 2008  Annual Meeting workshop planning sessions

October 2008  Writing Retreats A and B 2007 paperless anthologies are published on CD (intermediate publications).

**Professional Writing Retreats Leadership Team**

- **Rebeca Garcia Gonzalez**, Bay Area WP
- **Eileen Simmons**, Oklahoma State University Writing Project
- **Joe Check**, Boston Writing Project
- **Lisa Ummel-Ingram**, Oklahoma State University Writing Project
- **Nancy McCracken**, NWP-Kent State University
- **Iana Janisse**, National Writing Project
- **Nicki Lewis**, National Writing Project

We continue to draw on the expertise and experience of Art Peterson and Roxanne Barber as editors at the retreats and as representatives of NWP publications.

**Reflections on Previous Year’s Work**

**Impact of the Retreats**

The PWR national model is disseminated through local retreats, the *Professional Writing Retreat Handbook*, and Annual Meeting workshops; by participants; and through NWP’s new website. This model supports the work of local sites, state networks, and a number of NWP projects and initiatives. The following are some representative examples:

- A facilitator from the Oklahoma State University Writing Project and the writing retreat directors from NWP-Kent State University each wrote a piece for the “programs in action” section of the NWP website. This was part of a series based on the successes of PWR minigrant applicants.

- NWP networks, initiatives, and programs continue to adapt the PWR model to encourage writing by their teacher-leaders and to promote wider dissemination of the work of the network. The Rural Sites Network uses elements from the basic model in their resource development retreat, most recently, pre-retreat coaching. NWP tech leaders continue to hold their *Writing and Technology: A Professional Writing Retreat* in Nebraska for a fourth year.

- This year, successful minigrant recipients will be panelists at an Annual Meeting site development workshop illustrating practical ideas for future retreat organizers. The NWP retreat listserv was again the planning medium.
Publications have emerged from both the national and local models. In the last two years, 20 PWR participants have published either books or articles begun at the retreat. At the local level, we've learned of at least 24 new publications, the result of retreats held by minigrant recipients or former PWR participants.

The professional writing retreats and the workshops developed from such retreats continue to create dialogue on the nature of professional writing. The NWP network continues to be interested in professional writing, as evidenced by the record number of applications for this summer's retreats. In an effort to keep a record of the impact the national model is having at the local level, we have now begun to keep a list of publications by former PWR participants, which is updated annually.

We are using the NWP website, the Annual Meeting, and our handbook to lead explicit discussions on ways in which local sites might adapt the national model to their own goals. The workshops and sessions led by former participants at NWP's Annual Meeting offer concrete ideas on how to organize retreats with challenges such as small budgets and busy teacher-consultants. By hearing what may be possible at other sites, participants take back ideas to their site's director and leadership group. Former PWR participants, such as Michelle Croutteau from the Central Virginia WP, are returning to lead local retreats, contributing fresh ideas, and even writing about their experience. Michelle wrote an article titled “One Teacher’s Writing Journey: The Transformational Power of NWP’s Professional Writing Retreat.”

Documentation and Dissemination

A medium of increasing importance, because of its availability and low cost, is NWP’s redesigned website. We've increased our Web presence through the development of “nuts and bolts” articles aimed at retreat organizers, and have started publishing success stories at the local level. This year we've begun using varied ways to identify former participants willing to write about how they've organized local retreats. We’re also developing practical mentoring and editing methods so that the development of these pieces can take place entirely online.

We’ve continued distribution of the new edition of our Professional Writing Retreat Handbook during Annual Meeting workshops and NPL meetings, and to retreat participants.

Our intermediate publications, the retreat anthologies, are now produced on CD, in order to eliminate the cost of paper and reduce our carbon imprint. In many cases, these participant-produced anthologies are a first step in the authors’ process of submitting to other publications.

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1 The number is greater; these are only the participants who responded to our listserv query.
2 Numbers based on self-reporting and minigrant data.
The workshop we do each year at the Annual Meeting continues to play an important role. The Thursday site development workshops provide an opportunity to listen to ideas offered by retreat organizers from urban and rural sites, review the handbook, define the term “professional writing,” and become creative in planning at the local level.

**Plans for the Year Ahead**

After our transition in leadership and temporary budget reduction, our program has formulated the following goals:

- *Continue offering minigrants, and continue to disseminate findings from last year’s PWR minigrants:*

  We gave noncompetitive minigrants of $2,000 each to sixteen writing project sites whose teacher-consultants and/or site leaders participated in the 2006 Writing Retreat A. Several sites who received the funding articulated why this was a great opportunity. In the words of Michelle Rogge, of the Dakota Writing Project:

  > Because of the amount of money that would need to be charged to participants to cover expenses, no teacher in South Dakota can afford to attend. It is important to note that South Dakota teachers have continued to be the lowest paid teachers in the US. The minigrant made trying to develop this program possible.

  Their inspiring stories will continue to be featured on the NWP website, added to the handbook, and discussed in our Annual Meeting workshop.

- *Implement the merged model during the years we offer minigrants:*

  Our budget has been restored to previous levels. However, this year we held one summer retreat, serving 28 participants instead of 35. We served 20 percent fewer participants, and reduced the number of facilitators from six to five. The cost of food, lodging, and computer rental was reduced accordingly. Strands A and B ran concurrently and the retreat was a success both from the participants’ and facilitators’ perspective. The reduced number of participants helped the concurrent strands to run smoothly and preserved the sense of community for which our retreat is known.

  The merged model generates savings that can be used to cover minigrants, since disseminating the national model is part of our mission. As we learned from the 2006-2007 minigrant cycle, at many sites these funds can be the difference between holding or not holding a retreat. Minigrants allow us to build leadership and a knowledge base at the local level. We are considering alternating models each year to avoid a reduction in the number of PWR participants.
• **Increase the diversity of the applicant and facilitator pool for both retreats:**
Increased applicant diversity will continue to be a priority of this project. As a result of outreach to site directors in areas with diverse populations, this year 10 percent of our applicants were of color. An analysis of our applicant pool showed a need to increase our numbers of male applicants and of middle school teachers. Since we need continued contact with site directors to maintain or increase these numbers, next year a letter will go out to all site directors asking for male, middle school, and teacher-consultants of color nominees.

Diversity in facilitator backgrounds is considered by participants as one of the strengths of our model. In the words of a Retreat A writer: “I liked the variety in background of the facilitators. All the elements of their retreat are important, but the quality of the facilitators is the most critical.”

• **Incorporate mentoring into our year-round work to achieve a steady supply of Program in Action pieces for the NWP website:**
Two writers will attend the National Programs Dissemination Retreat in Atlanta to work on articles we’ve commissioned, two panelists will develop articles out of their workshop at the Annual Meeting, and a former retreat participant has been identified as a potential writer. We are working to develop ways to integrate the mentoring of writers into our year-round work, in order to use our time and resources more efficiently.

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