A Day at the Annual Meeting

Each year, upon seeing the finished product of the annual meeting program booklet, many of us within the National Writing Project network grow nearly giddy with anticipation. Receiving and digesting the program schedule is comparable to reviewing a catalog of book titles we haven’t read: full of endless possibilities. We pore over the sessions, perusing their titles and descriptions, and, along the way, imagine attending each and every session.

A feat, that, of course, is impossible.

In fact, a person attending as many Thursday workshops and Friday sessions as possible would be able to attend a maximum of six sessions (assuming that one is attending an entire session and not session hopping). But pretending for a moment that one could be in more than one place at a time, we’ve created the following special cross-section of sessions, events, and social moments from the annual meeting. With it, we hope to capture the spirit of the meeting once more—as much for those who attended as for those who were unable to.

THURSDAY SESSIONS

Sessions AM5 and PM5: How to Use NWP Site Profile Data to Your Site’s Advantage
With laptops in hand, site directors and co-directors crammed this session on Thursday to learn how to create handouts and reports to support claims about their sites. Using their own site’s data and a tool kit developed by Inverness Research Associates, participants spent the three-hour morning and afternoon sessions creating pie charts and graphs to show, for example, that their site serves a diverse group of teachers and students or has a track record of steady growth in numbers of programs offered, or participants served, over time. Such graphs would come in handy, participants said, when asking administrators for more release time or demonstrating to local funders the efficacy of their local site. The workshop also compelled directors to look carefully at their data, sometimes raising questions about their sites and the teachers they serve.

FRIDAY SESSIONS

Session B9: Creating a Site Structure to Support Summer and School Year Programs
Presenters Tom Fox, director of the Northern California Writing Project, and Richard Louth, director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, made a dynamic pair to tackle a discussion of mapping a site’s leadership structure. The session served to both demystify the task and present techniques for accomplishing it. As a result of both large- and small-group discussions, participants found themselves reflecting on the physical structure of site leadership, considering how to clearly present that information to someone outside the site, and then reexamining both facets in light of the other. The idea of a discussion about this very mechanics-based aspect of site leadership—something that site leaders probably don’t have the opportunity to discuss with other site leaders very often—seemed captivating to participants who packed the meeting room. Both Louth and Fox spoke openly throughout the session, offering approaches they’ve used and challenges they’ve had in both creating and mapping site leadership. But the gains they’ve made in thinking about site leader-ship in regard to site tasks were also readily apparent, and may have been the most impressive aspect of the presentation.

Session B11: The Male Factor: What We Know About Male Literacy and How Literacy Instruction Can Respond
This session was presented by Jeff Wilhelm, director, and Ryan Mahan, teacher-consultant, both of the University of Maine Writing Project. Wilhelm discussed his study of the literate lives of boys, which he and Michael W. Smith conducted and then documented in “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys” (Heinemann 2002). Wilhelm found that for boys’ literacy experiences in school to be successful, they need to meet the conditions of “flow” experiences, defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.” Those conditions include a sense of control and competence; a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill; clear goals and feedback; and a focus on the immediate experience. Wilhelm found that most boys had flow experiences in other areas of their lives—playing video games, for example—but rarely in the classroom.

The study found that when classroom activities did meet the conditions of a flow experience, they were much more engaging and successful. Inquiry-oriented curriculum is an example of the type of classroom practice that often meets flow conditions and is the most engaging for boys, Wilhelm found. In one successful classroom, for example, instead of just reading Romeo and Juliet, the teacher turned the
exchange experiences. In 2002, TEX supported two-week exchanges among sites in Nevada, Michigan, and Missouri during summer invitational institutes; in-state mini-exchanges among several sites in Georgia and Oregon; and special focus exchanges to sites in Pennsylvania and Alaska.

Among the presenters, Chere Peguesse, director, and Adam Hathaway, co-director of the South Georgia Writing Project, talked about the positive impact of the in-state exchanges among several Georgia sites and their plans to build regular exchanges into their state network development model.

Meanwhile, two 2002 TEX teacher-consultants involved in cross-site exchanges received additional stipends for follow-up cross-site inquiry projects that will allow them to continue the professional conversations they began during their exchange visits. Jennifer Conrad of the Third Coast Writing Project, Michigan, told session participants how her visit to Las Vegas inspired her to explore the possibilities of developing a writing fair at her home site based on the Southern Nevada Writing Project’s program model. And Lynn Welsch, also of the Third Coast Writing Project, who spent two weeks at the Gateway Writing Project in Missouri, will continue to explore the similarities and differences in the challenges that teachers and students face in rural and urban school districts.

**Session D4: Turning a Workshop or Demonstration into a Published Piece**

At this year’s annual meeting, teachers with a special interest in publication found a niche. For the first time, they were able to follow a publication strand made up of four linked workshops, including “Turning a Workshop or Demonstration into a Published Piece.” In this session, Art Peterson, senior editor of NWP publications, Joe Check, director of the Boston Writing Project, and Kathleen O’Shaughnessy, co-director of the National Writing Project of Acadia (Louisiana), conducted a session motivated by a sad truth: many excellent teaching demonstrations that should be shared with a wider audience never make it into a larger arena.

O’Shaughnessy, like Check a coach at the NWP Professional Writing Retreat, recounted how her thinking about her work with teachers coalesced into *The Quarterly* article “Do Workshops Work?” Check discussed the idea of “interim publication,” arguing that the journey from demonstration to article can be a series of steps. For example, by setting as a goal publication in the newsletter of a local site, a writer is taking a smaller, less-daunting step along a path that may lead to national publication. Peterson discussed a series of questions that may help a teacher-demonstrator reframe her work as an article: What is the main idea you want teachers to take away from your demonstration? Into what segments is your demonstration divided? What use have teachers made of your ideas? Together, the three presenters hoped to motivate participants toward yet another means of dissemination.

**Session D16: Race, Writing, and Grammar: Connections?**

Peter Golden, teacher-consultant, and Denise Patton, faculty liaison, both of the Boston Writing Project, presented a case study of a student teacher to prompt discussion around
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how race, writing, and grammar connect, or don't connect, in the classroom. When the student teacher decided to work with students on grammar, her cooperating teacher suggested she do so in the context of the students' own writing. In a high school with a history of racial tensions among students, the student teacher asked her ninth-graders to write an essay on racism while reading Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. The essays would be excerpted and shared anonymously with the class, with a focus on grammatical elements and errors. One-third of students, however, requested their writing not be shared, and, the student teacher found, these students were almost exclusively white.

Session participants discussed the implications of this assignment and subsequent classroom activity, surfacing several possible issues: students may not have wanted their views about racism exposed; students were afraid to "rock the boat" or have their thoughts misinterpreted as racism; students feared that they might be identified through their writing; and the inflammatory nature of the content overshadowed the intended grammar lesson. Many felt that the teacher was naive to expect that student essays on racism could serve this purpose. They agreed that not having first devoted some class time to discuss the topic was dismissive of the individual students' feelings, perspectives, and experiences with racism.

Some questioned the wisdom of asking the students to write on this topic in a school with a history of racial tensions and felt that the teacher created an unsafe environment by doing so. Participants noted the need for more cross-cultural communication in teacher preparation courses to help inexperienced but well-meaning teachers gain a better understanding of race issues in the classroom. And, many admitted, there needs to be much more of this kind of conversation among skilled veteran teachers as well.

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