What stands out for me in the story of the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) website and Web presence is the way changes occurred in the evolution of the website. In the very early stages, changes in our website were small, as it was used and updated by only a handful of teacher-consultants and the PhilWP directors at the time—Judy Buchanan, then Marci Resnick and Susan Lytle. Later, as interest in the Web continued to grow, technology liaison Darlene Gray and directors Vanessa Brown and Susan Lytle suggested that the website reflect the ideas, interests, and needs of the broader PhilWP community as represented by the site’s leadership teams—the Coordinating Team and the Steering Committee. These governing bodies collaborated with the technology liaison and the PhilWP teacher-consultants—connected through the site’s listserv—to give birth to the current site at www.gse.upenn.edu/philwp.

The Beginning Stages

The PhilWP website began in 1998 thanks to the work of our first administrative assistant, Christina Cantrill. Christina was interested in the workings of the Internet, which had just become available to the PhilWP office. She designed a website that offered basic information about PhilWP and set up a related listserv at the university. At that time there was a great interest in movies (both for personal and professional uses), so a movie review link was created. Then links to continuity program workshops were posted (e.g., PhilWP offered a technology workshop for parents and students; their work and related resources were subsequently posted on the PhilWP website). Caltropia Wilder, PhilWP’s first technology liaison, added links to descriptions of writing project workshop offerings, the summer invitational institute, and the advanced institute “Inquiry into Practice,” as well as a link to resources for teachers. These resources included lists of websites dealing with the writing process and books about the teaching of writing.

The Influence of Project Outreach

PhilWP’s involvement in Project Outreach from 2001 to 2004 informed our thinking about the urgency of addressing issues of access, relevance, and diversity across our site’s work. This included PhilWP’s Web presence. In 2002 technology liaison Darlene Grey strategically redesigned the website in response to feedback from teacher-consultants on the existing PhilWP website. She then facilitated a structured look at other writing project websites and posed questions to the teacher-consultants attending leadership team meetings, which included, What would you like to see on the website? What changes would you like to
see in our use of technology to support our network and our work? How can the principles addressed in our Project Outreach work be represented by our Web presence? The responses indicated a yearning for more relevant teacher resources on the website, opportunities for critical online communication and engagement, easier access to programs and resources described on the website and listserv, and a general calendar of information regarding local, state, and national writing project events.

Vanessa Brown, director, wanted a place for teachers to request information about the summer invitational institute. Darlene wanted a blog space for critical collaborations. Others responded that they wanted the website to be more interactive. As a result, the PhilWP’s inservice and continuity programs including the New Teacher Initiative, the Advanced Institute: Inquiry into Practice, and SIGNL (Seminar in Gender Literacy) have all included blogs as communication and resource tools. These programs, the leadership teams, and the advisory board also have their own listservs. All program leaders were given disposable cameras to use during their offerings, with the intent of capturing images that would reflect the broad range of participants we were reaching at this time and posting those images online.

Darlene originally created a website plan in Microsoft Word format. It was then given to the webmaster at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, who worked with Darlene to construct a flow chart before converting the design into a format compatible with the school’s Web design software and server. The graduate school’s webmaster then put up the new website for PhilWP.

In 2003, a website redesign plan was created. The redesign had an aesthetic focus and made sure the website reflected the influences of Project Outreach, while taking into account all the suggestions previously submitted by the leadership teams and other site members. After reviewing other websites, Joyce Millman designed the colors and tabs. She chose pictures from the wide assortment collected during our various sponsored school-year programs—looking for those that would reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of our site and service area. Joyce used Microsoft Publisher to create templates that were then sent to the university webmaster for conversion to DreamWeaver (a Web publishing software) so our revised website could be easily uploaded to the university server.

Where We Are Now

When Mardys Leeper, a recent PhilWP technology liaison, assumed responsibility for maintaining the website two years ago, PhilWP’s new goal was to make the website more useful as an instructional tool that could be used by teacher-consultants to help them improve their instructional practices. Mardys tried to make suggested changes, but found the process to be time consuming and tedious because she had to wait for her changes to be transferred to the website by the webmaster at the Graduate School of Education. With the assistance of director Vanessa Brown, Mardys was given a university ID and password that would allow her to access the Web server at the Graduate School of Education, where the PhilWP website resides. Meetings were arranged between Mardys and the webmaster, and a system was set up for making Web changes and submitting them for uploading. A newer version of DreamWeaver was purchased and installed on both Mardys’s personal laptop and a writing project computer to facilitate Web maintenance and updating. This purchase eliminated the need for the earlier conversion step from Microsoft Publisher that Darlene and Joyce had endured.

Regular check-in times were established between Vanessa and Mardys to review writing project technology needs and progress toward completion of projects. Mardys has now suggested a new expanded technology team with whom she can collaborate more regularly and get Web revisions attended to more efficiently, while continuing to pay attention to the overall tech presence and needs of the site.
PhilWP was represented at the 2007 Web Presence Retreat by Jennifer Gee-Hale and Mitchell Schwartz, members of our expanded tech team. Mitchell coordinates video documentation of site projects and Jennifer coordinates our online communities. We continue to create, change, and solve issues related to our website and Web presence and to address Project Outreach goals. Our tech team has broadened its focus and its presence across all the work of our site. We are hoping that our website will become a central place to highlight the work we are doing across the diverse communities that make up the Philadelphia Writing Project’s service area.