

“We Make the Road by Walking”: Building the Urban Sites Network

Richard Sterling

Summary: In his keynote address at the 2008 Urban Sites Network Conference in Denver, Colorado, Richard Sterling traces the development of the USN from its roots at City College of New York, describing the events, the people, the challenges, the passion, and the learning that make up its history.

Today I'd like to take you on a journey. Some of it's personal, but most of it's about how we, the Urban Sites Network, came to be where we are now. The title of my talk comes from a book title of the same name. This book is a conversation on education and social change between Miles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Research and Education Center and a major figure in the civil rights movement, and Paulo Freire, the Brazilian author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The title of this conference is “Reading and Writing for Understanding and Social Change in the Urban Classroom,” and I think that both the conference title and the title of this talk convey the active nature of our work.

I think the work of the Urban Sites Network along with the other networks in the NWP are very important for students who *most* need the opportunities that real literacy provides, and I want to try and capture some of the history that brings us all here today. My journey through the Urban Sites Network will, of course, be somewhat idiosyncratic. After all it's my recollections!

As many of you know, my early experiences in education weren't exactly successful. I was a poor high school student, in fact a drop-out from my London grammar school, and a B-minus engineer. I did read, of course, though I did little writing.

An Academic Awakening

My first instance of an educational experience that meant anything to me occurred several years

after I arrived in the United States and enrolled at the City College of New York (CCNY) in 1967. For the first time in my life, I wasn't bored in classes—for two basic reasons. First, the students were from an enormous variety of backgrounds; the atmosphere was intensely competitive, and highly stimulating. The instructors were not all wonderful, but word of mouth got you to the right classes and courses. It was here that I discovered my voice.

The second reason is that the teachers demanded that I shape and hone that voice into a coherent intellectual presentation. I could always talk (as all my friends will testify), but to write something where charm, a quick smile, and a fast pace didn't count was more challenging. On the page was what counted, and the page was and is unforgiving. So at CCNY in the midst of the turmoil of the 60s, I learned to write, to read more carefully, and to think coherently. It is true that until that time, I had never been asked, challenged, or expected to be such a person. The exhilaration is hard to describe!

Open Admissions—Opportunities and Issues

During my senior year, CCNY and all of City University of New York, in acknowledging its failures to educate a more diverse population, changed its admission policies and went to an open admissions system. This meant that every high school graduate was guaranteed a place at the City University of New York. At CCNY, they hired a number of faculty to work with these “new” students. Among these new teachers was Mina Shaughnessy. She ran the writing program at City College, and hired a number of seniors to work with these students on their writing. I was one of those hired, and this event was the turning point in my career and life!

Before me were students who differed little from where I had been when I entered college three years before. They were intelligent, quick, and opinionated! But they didn't know how to read or write well, and they did not know the complexities and rules of the academic discourse they were expected to master. The insight that I gained here, which now seems commonplace to me, was that we master the discourses we need, and up to the point that we reach college they are those that connect us to our community and our life.

What we and they (the students) were ready to do was bring their passions, desires, and energy to these new settings, and they were ready to take on the new tasks of academic learning. Whether, as in my case, you have your mind set on twenty areas of interest all bobbing round in your head

at once, or whether you were singular in your desire to follow any one of a dozen different professional paths, this institution was ready to help you shape those passions. It was ready to help you make a connection between you and the language and habits you would need to help you cross that bridge.

Next I will fast forward to my first real teaching job two years later at Lehman College. Now I was a real part of the teaching team for our nontraditional students, as they were then called. I want to pause for a moment to identify a dilemma that emerged during the first big push to increase the number and diversity of students in our higher education system. For many high school students, the cachet and potential of a university education became in their minds the only option leading to a more promising life, and as such it had attracted significant numbers to CUNY.

Enrollment soared; remedial courses expanded rapidly, but for the first time at CUNY significant numbers of students were dropping out. The failure to read and write well was at the base of this churning, and writing emerged as the ultimate gatekeeper. Mina Shaughnessy was asked to solve this problem, and I was recruited, along with several others, to collect research data on the writing and assessment of remedial students. Under Mina's guidance we went on to study the writing of freshmen and to glean from them the underlying logic of their "Errors and Expectations" to quote from the title of Mina's now-famous book.

The Writing Center

During this period, I also met Ken Bruffee at Brooklyn College, a branch of CUNY. Through our research we learned that Brooklyn College was doing something unique. It was there that I first saw components of Ken's "Brooklyn Plan," involving peer tutoring and collaborative learning principles, outlined in his now-famous book, *A Short Course in Writing*. Looking back on it now, I see that it was this early experience with *peer tutoring* and *collaborative learning* that contributed to my own philosophy and helped me to develop the understanding of how to structure organizations as networks.

At Lehman College in 1973, I was given the task of setting up a writing center and staffing it. Staffing was accomplished through a federal program known as CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). I worked with a team of about seven staff, all of whom were

recent college graduates. During the summer we worked to prepare materials for the coming semester. We used Ken Bruffee's *Short Course in Writing* as our text, and designed the training of our staff using Bruffee's approaches.

It is difficult to explain how revolutionary this book was to us when we began our writing center! Traditionally, tutors would read and correct student papers, explain their mistakes, and attempt to get the students to rewrite their papers. For very many, these methods did not work well at all, as the correction of papers did not uncover the underlying reason for the mistakes.

What was revolutionary about Bruffee's book was his rethinking of the role of the teacher, mentor, and tutor. Collaboration, learning as a social construct, and providing an audience and purpose for writing were new ideas. And our implementation of these ideas was uncertain, and often perfunctory. What we did was use each other as models for the work that we would begin with undergraduates in the fall. We wrote papers, we worked in small groups each following Bruffee's strategies: writing from your own experience, free writing, asking questions, speculating; all were not merely allowed, but promoted.

Writing flowed, and it was remarkably liberating. Many of us expressed astonishment at the ease with which we were writing, as well as the volume that poured forth. Following these drafts, we then met to discuss the pieces. Again, instead of providing a standard critique, we became a supportive inquiring audience for the work in progress, asking questions, suggesting clarification, while all the time checking with the author to see if that was his or her intent.

With meaning made clear to the satisfaction of the audience, the revision process moved toward standard editing functions. Our summer preparation turned out to be enjoyable and instructive. Many spoke of an awakening of an urge to write.

That fall our writing center opened, and students began to appear. Our staff of seven were each armed with a copy of Bruffee's book. The term was frantic—exhilarating, but only partly successful. Many students came wanting specific help on specific papers. They were impatient with the process; they were dealing with assigned topics, and our staff had to respond to those needs. Few of the students were in classrooms where instructors were using approaches aligned with our staff's new philosophy.

I was teaching two sections of basic writing, and now for the first time using Bruffee's book in my class, but even here, I discovered that the range of demands that were being made simultaneously on students were in direct opposition to the methods I wished to use. How then to get our students excited about the act of writing itself? Pressures in these early days led to a significant watering down of the work of the writing center, and turned much of our work in more utilitarian directions. We taught grammar, we corrected papers, and we probably did a fair amount of rewriting the papers ourselves.

Peer Tutoring

Toward the end of that first year, many of the CETA staff members left to take regular jobs. So, returning to Bruffee's book, I designed and received approval for a course called "peer tutoring." Following Bruffee's structure, I designed the course to include training for the first three weeks of the course, then tutoring sessions with small groups of students, including some one-on-one tutoring, and finally meetings with the whole group once a week.

This time we were more successful. The tutors enjoyed the more social aspects of this kind of collaboration. They enjoyed the new, more equal collaboration with students, and they discovered that they were learning a great deal about their own knowledge. The course was a success, and its reputation grew. The second term the course was oversubscribed.

The experience at Lehman College led to regular sections of peer tutoring, the establishing of a writing center that used Bruffee's book as its central philosophy, and a growing awareness of the importance of collaboration in the learning process. Across CUNY writing programs, a similar pattern emerged, though from time to time there was opposition from people who believed that peer tutoring was an inefficient way to assist struggling writers.

Once again, Bruffee took up this challenge. Following his attendance at a course in epistemology at the New School, Bruffee argued that "if knowledge is constructed by the discursive practices of communities of people, and learning thereby involves joining new communities, then we can stop worrying about the blind leading the blind."

The extraordinary events of the early 1970s brought together faculty in relatively small groups from across the university to tackle the emerging problems associated with open admissions.

This far smaller group of faculty came to know each other well over the next ten years. They in turn came to represent the entry point for the thousands of first-generation, first-year students.

Jim Gray's Revolution

Meanwhile, across these United States, a high school teacher impatient for many years with the way teachers were being prepared to teach English had an opportunity to try something new. Jim Gray, as most of you know well, brought teachers together in the summer of 1974 for a new approach. Teachers were actually asked to demonstrate what they knew! This first summer created the beginnings of what was to become a revolution in the way professional development was offered to teachers.

What Jim Gray envisioned was a community of teachers who cared about their students and their intellectual lives as teachers, and who found joy and excitement in meeting together to ask questions and solve problems. The revolution was in seeing the summer invitational as the beginning, not a one-time summer adventure.

The practical side of this new way of thinking was in making the university the home for teachers as they created the project. In many ways universities are vulnerable to ideas like this. They can readily see that students who come to them need good literacy skills; they can also see that they have a moral responsibility to the communities that they live in. Armed with these moral and intellectual arguments, they have indeed become the home to nearly 200 sites of the writing project. (Of course, all of us have to remind colleges and universities of these commitments with alarming regularity!)

Birth of the Urban Sites Network

It was during the summer of 1977 that my colleagues from CUNY and I presented our research findings from this intense work with basic writing students at a national conference, and it was here that Jim Gray, a member of the audience for our presentation, approached us to begin the New York City writing project. I suppose from the beginning the appeal for me was the idea that perhaps now we would understand where writing instruction had gone wrong, and we would have a chance to work with teachers in the K–12 system, and between and among us we could sort this problem out. And so the NYCWP was born!

In the late '70s and the early '80s, the NWP network grew rapidly, and we in the NYC project looked forward to our yearly meeting at NCTE. In those days the entire writing project could meet in one small room, but even then there began to be an informal gathering of directors and teachers from some of the big cities. My memory is that Joe Check, then director of the Boston Writing Project, was the first to call attention to the problems particular to urban schools. Some of you may remember when Joe first spoke to us about issues facing urban schools at the NWP Annual Meeting in Baltimore. He has continued to write articles, and a book about school reform, *Politics, Language, and Culture: A Critical Look at Urban School Reform*. But I am getting ahead of myself here.

Our work developed gradually at first—one of our early Urban Sites meetings involved only about 10 people. We complained to each other about the challenges we faced in urban schools, the lack of resources, and so forth, but like writing project people everywhere we quickly moved to problem solving, and the sharing of strategies that were working.

School reform was in the air, and teachers were actually being asked to help develop new approaches. Writing project sites were getting more work, and we began to see that together we might well have answers to problems facing urban schools. Some of the issues then were management of large classes; literacy issues across the K–12 span; ELL (or ESL as it was called then); teaching students of color.

What did we know collectively, what did we need to know, and how could we find and share information in a pre-Internet world? The strength of our K–16 model meant that we could readily think of literacy development across all grades, and we needed this group of urban people thinking together to make it come together.

First though, what did we mean by urban? Some suggested criteria I remember included these: It must have a subway; it must have linguistic and ethnic diversity; it should have live theater and good restaurants (remember this was 1987!). In the end we decided that, in the writing project tradition, all those who wished could identify themselves as urban educators and they would be welcome. But we also sought to influence the larger network. This mostly consisted of lobbying Jim Gray to raise these issues, put them on the conference agenda, and “certify” us as an official group of the NWP, which he did.

Getting Funded

So, now we were official, what to do next? Raise Money! The NWP's budget was very small: there was no federal funding, and the small amounts we occasionally got would do little to get us together. So we started writing proposals, with little success. But one did look promising. In 1990, we applied to the then new DeWitt Wallace–Readers Digest Fund for \$50,000 to bring us together once a year, to collect some information from various sites about teaching in urban areas, and then to print and send that information to the network.

The foundation sent Mildred Hudson to our summer institute at the NYCWP, and Linette Moorman played host. Mildred came back after her day at the summer institute to meet with me and Carla Asher. She sat down and said something like, “You’ve asked for \$50 thousand, and I think I’m happy to approve this grant, but what if you could really take this idea to scale? How big would it be, how much money would you need?” Carla Asher and I paused. I looked at her and she looked at me: We were both furiously calculating. It was clear Mildred wanted an answer right then. I finally said, “Oh my, that would be very expensive.” She said, “How much?” I took a deep breath and said, “Over a million!” She said, “Write a proposal. I need it in a week.” And so the first Urban Sites Writing Network was born, and we received this enormous sum and began the task of inviting sites to apply.

It is true that this first grant changed everything for very many people. We talked to Jim Gray, who told me that our grant was then almost as large as the entire NWP budget at that time. Jim invited Joe Check and me to give speeches at the upcoming Annual Meeting in Baltimore, and he offered to help in any way that made sense to us. So the first group of sites of the funded Urban Sites Writing Network (or USWN) began when we went to the Chauncey Conference Center on the ETS (Educational Testing Service) campus in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1991.

As an aside: This venue was a treat! I remember Mildred Hudson telling us that we should treat the teachers well, and that this conference center, though a bit expensive, was what universities used for their meetings. All the participating teachers loved the treatment, which was so different from their experience in their districts.

Expanding Diversity

Now I'd like to read from a piece I wrote after the project finished its second year, which was published in *Social Action* (a journal in England—talk about irony!):

At the Center of the USWN was a desire on the part of Project teachers to share their knowledge and struggles in the classroom and to seek new knowledge that would help their children become successful learners. As professionals in too-often beleaguered school systems, these urban teachers also wanted to assume a critical voice in the school reform movement by forming an advocacy group in urban education that could be heard across the country. Our goals included a commitment to greater equity in resources for all children, coupled with a determination to promote a deeper understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity of students in urban classrooms while holding high expectations for their ability to learn and compete with children elsewhere.

But here we were faced with another dilemma. How were we to take on this agenda when our own diversity within the writing project was yet to be realized? At our first planning meeting in New York City, a small group from Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore gathered. From Baltimore, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl brought as her co-coordinator Lisa Delpit. I was meeting her for the first time, though I was aware of her writing. I asked her, as one of the few persons of color in the room, how we could make this USWN program more diverse. She paused and said, “mandate it.” “Is that legal?” I asked. “I don’t know” she said, “but at least we’ll see who’s out there in the cities.” And so we did. We said that in order to apply for the funding, 50 percent of your site team had to be people of color.

Questions and Issues

Quoting again from the *Social Action* article:

Through our discussions, seminars, presentations, and individual conversations, several overriding questions emerged: How can we ensure that students in our classrooms are learning? How do we help students to represent their thinking in writing? How can children’s cultural backgrounds be used to support learning,

and how do we involve parents and communities in that effort? What is the relationship between language and learning in diverse classrooms? How do we demonstrate and assess children's progress? How do race and social class impact the way we understand and talk to each other and to our students?

Let me pause for a moment to comment: These questions seem to me as pertinent for urban sites today as they were seventeen years ago, which does not mean that we have not learned a great deal since that time or made substantial changes in teaching and learning. The questions, though, are powerful, and there are no simple answers to them.

Again quoting,

Conversations turned to sensitive issues connected to our teaching, our pedagogy, and our effectiveness as educators. For many of us, these frank discussions of race, ethnicity, and education were the first we had in a setting where members of all groups under discussion were present.

Hard Talk

When teachers returned for a second summer after a year of documenting their work in urban classrooms, they brought many compelling issues. For many of the teachers and coordinators alike, close classroom scrutiny had resulted in a rising dissatisfaction with the conditions, methods, and content of their own teaching. On numerous occasions, our discussions also focused on our fears concerning the rising problem of violence, the reduction of resources, the general deterioration of the physical conditions of school buildings, and—underlying the entire process—the simultaneous cutting of school budgets.

The second summer also brought a heightened awareness of the issues of language, race, gender, and class that had informed the first summer institute. The need to continue discussions that dealt honestly and effectively with these issues led us to question ourselves and each other about differences in perception, and our underlying beliefs about children and their ability and desire to learn. We began to come to grips with the idea that even though we cared about students, teachers from different backgrounds and cultures had different ideas about how best to educate the students we were committed to.

In short, we began to reflect on our quiet and disquieting beliefs about students who come, in many instances, from places and circumstances so different from our own. All these conversations came to be called “hard talk.” Shortly after such discussions had begun, we sought for ways to relate them productively to the inquiry projects we were embarking upon. We created a list of guidelines, which, for example, discussed the responsibility of individuals within the community who have to give “hard” feedback to presenters. We also sought to establish trust within the group through carefully planned sessions during which we could speak about our own personal experiences and their impact on our own intellectual and social growth, and our teaching.

The desire to be more effective and compassionate teachers forced us to ask of each other, What do I have to know to teach the children in my school and city? What am I thinking or what do I believe that is standing in the way of my being a better teacher? What do I say, think, or do that silences or opens conversation between myself and a student, myself and another teacher, myself and a parent?

Increasingly, these conversations shaped our classroom inquiry projects. One teacher decided to bring parents into her classroom, include them in instruction and ask them to help plan their children’s education, drawing directly from both the teachers’ and parents’ shared sense of the child’s needs. Another designed a project with a group of high-school-aged mothers, helping them plan for their children’s education in the context of their own needs.

Many teachers in this project appear to have changed in ways that go to the heart of a teacher’s practice. They speak often about the importance of learning how to listen very carefully to their students, to parents, and to colleagues. They began to speak candidly with each other in terms of ethnicity and social class, asking each other such questions as What student behavior is acceptable, and what is not? What marks cultural norms, and when a teacher’s philosophy and pedagogy are in conflict with her student’s behavior, how are these conflicts resolved or negotiated in the interest of the student’s learning?

It is clear to all of us involved in USWN that we have begun a difficult conversation that often goes to the very root of cultural self-definition. To participate in hard talk, many of us must challenge cherished beliefs and be willing to give up attitudes that serve only to maintain the

status quo. For these brave enough to take the ride, it may mean a very powerful learning experience for teachers and students alike.

But one thing is clear to most of us who have participated. We are convinced that conversations about language, race, class, and gender are leading us to become more effective educators. We are beginning to see through others' eyes, and we are beginning to envision futures for all children like the ones we envision for our own. Finally, we have begun to build a community of educators that can undertake, along with parents and others, the fight that awaits us in order to redress the vast inequalities plaguing the education of children in our large urban centers.

The Power of Inquiry

One of the major changes that *I* went through during this first phase of the development of the Urban Sites Network was to learn more about learning. In many ways my work with the project had kept me far from the day-to-day classrooms issues, and ways that real teachers were dealing with them. This three-year program taught me several things: first, it taught me about the power of inquiry, and here I have to thank, in particular, Judy Buchanan. Let me say I was a reluctant learner!

This stance toward research had been developing in a few sites, such as the Philadelphia Writing Project, where I saw teachers and their coordinators take up their areas for study. It was through this process that I saw the most powerful results emerge. Developing questions, looking into practice in a carefully measured way, refining the questions, and then looking again, all began to produce insights for our work. Let me quote from the national evaluation of this work by Donna Muncey, an anthropologist and educator, who is currently working in Maryland as a school district director of curriculum and instruction:

Inquiry or the inquiry process formed the vital connection between the creation of community and the work of individuals within that community. As such, it has come to play a (if not, the) central role in USN work. . . . (teachers) began to see themselves as learners and their classrooms as arenas within which they could experiment with ideas designed to engage their students in productive and meaningful learning.

And what were some of those results? From 1991 to 1994, more than 120 teachers participated in structured two-year inquiry studies of their classrooms or schools. There were 89 presentations at national and international conferences by the Urban Sites participants and 60 local presentations. Numerous publications—book chapters, articles in journals, NWP publications, and the NWP book *Cityscapes*—all poured forth from teachers’ classroom inquiry projects and teaching experiences.

On a personal note, I also learned what it meant to participate in a national project. I learned that what sometimes feels like a local issue to be blamed on, perhaps, a superintendent, a principal, or the mayor may in fact be a commonplace in eight other cities, and so the problem solving may be better done by talking with people outside one’s own habitat. But it also gave me courage to think nationally, and when Jim Gray announced his retirement in the final year of the USWN project, I decided to apply for the position. One idea that I presented to the panel that interviewed me was the idea of taking the USWN project to all parts of the country—rural, urban and suburban—and ultimately for this work to become a central part of the way the NWP works.

Working with the group of writing project leaders from Urban Sites led to the development of Project Outreach and a new grant from De Witt Wallace to extend the principles of the USN to support site development throughout all NWP work. Elyse Eidman-Aadahl also joined me in California to lead this work and then to develop the full range of NWP programs, and that is where we stand today. As a result of all of this work, we developed the mission statement for the NWP and we developed report questions requiring all sites to examine their own ability to serve all the teachers and students in their community.

But the work is never finished, of course.

Where We’re Going

And so, what’s next for the USN? Well, this network just won’t stand still! (And, by the way, we were even experimenting with new technology back then—UrbNet was our very first, very creaky electronic communication network modeled on Bread Loaf’s BreadNet—but that’s another story!) Technology; New Teachers Initiative; dealing with assessments, so narrowly defined that they shut out good instruction; lack of resources, particularly as we enter a recession; and losing good teachers because they are not supported in their districts. Some of

these problems are as ever before, but there are some wonderful new opportunities that, I believe, will help writing project teachers and leaders in the years ahead.

First, let me remind you of what MIT's Mitchel Resnick suggested for the 21st century, which will sound familiar to many of you since I have spoken about his work in other talks. Quoting Resnick:

(1) **Rethink *how* people learn.** . . . Students can become more active and independent learners, with the teacher serving as consultant Instead of dividing up the curriculum into separate disciplines, we should focus on themes and projects that cut across disciplines . . . we should let students work on projects for extended periods of time.

(2) **Rethink *what* people learn.** Schools must prepare students with the new skills and ideas that are needed for living and working in a digital society . . . where knowledge is the currency. Many ideas and topics that have always been important but were left out because they were too difficult to teach with only paper, pencil and blackboard are now accessible through digital technologies.

(3) **Rethink *where* and *when* people learn.** Most education reform initiatives assume that learning takes place between 8 A.M. and 3 P.M.

We can see these trends in learning with digital tools already part of some writing project classrooms and supported by the NWP Technology Initiative, the Tech Liaisons, the E-Anthology, and other project work across the country.

And John Seeley Brown, the chief scientist at the Xerox Corporation, makes a related cogent point regarding learning during the school years:

Learning by doing with others offers students the opportunity for in-depth enculturation into a particular practice, where one learns to be a physicist, social scientist, historian, etc., in contrast to just learning about such professions. Students could absorb the social and practical aspects of a profession (its practices) and gain tremendously from their proximity to practitioners, especially when they can watch, listen, and peripherally participate. Enculturation is crucial to such learning, since relatively little of the complex web of practice can effectively be made the subject of explicit instruction.

We can see also see these strategies and approaches to learning in writing project classrooms. And just as recently at the beginning of April we learned the encouraging news that there was a modest increase in NAEP scores for writing in the eighth and twelfth grade and across all ethnic and racial groups. (It must be the NWP effect!)

A Successful Urban School

Two weeks ago, I went with Ed Osterman from the NYCWP to visit Bronx International High School, housed in what had been a large urban high school that I had known in the '80s. It had been transformed into five small schools, and the International School comprised almost 300 students, all of whom were fairly recent arrivals to the United States. This previously run-down, uncared-for building was clean, the walls were covered with student projects and work, and there was a quiet bustle in the halls.

I observed a twelfth grade English class, a twelfth grade economics class, and a ninth/tenth grade history class. It was quite wonderful! I saw students discussing and reading from their writing about the degree to which the theories of Adam Smith, Keynes, and Marx had changed our economic life, and the degree to which they continue to play a significant role in the US economy; I saw students working on a sophisticated analysis of Othello, and I saw students examining the writings of Frederick Douglass. There are still issues for students—ninth-graders struggle, some drop out, and language learning in a new culture is not easy. But the students that I observed were confident, engaged students. In the twelfth grade class, all had acceptances to college.

So in conclusion, I wish to thank just a few of the people and the eleven writing project sites who, in the early days, helped to build the Urban Sites Network into the strong, vibrant force that it is today: Joe Check, Judy Buchanan, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Denise Patmon, Marci Resnick, Lisa Delpit, Peter Golden, Polly Ulichny, Barbara Kato, Lucy Ware, Deborah Jumpp, Millie Veal, Carol Tateishi, Patsy Lockhart, Rosalynde Scott, Michael Lowenstein, Marlene Carter, Faye Peitzman, Doris Smith, and all of my colleagues at the New York City Writing Project who helped make all of this possible, including Marcie Wolfe, Linette Moorman, and Ed Osterman.

I'm going to end my journey along this pathway with a quote from another powerful piece of writing, which many of you may have heard. I think it resonates powerfully with the mission of the work we have built together.

On March 18 [2008], Barack Obama said,

I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story. This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

And with all of you, and the NWP continuing its work, we can bring this vision for all students closer to reality.

Thank you