The Emerging NWP Writing Retreat Model

BY ART PETERTSON

It's a basic tenet of the National Writing Project that teachers should write—a worthy objective, but there's sometimes a problem. When is this writing supposed to happen?

Teachers who spend more than 60 hours a week presiding in a classroom, conferring with students and parents, creating lessons, reading and commenting on student work, and attending meetings, hardly have time to do the wash, what's more write a novel. Except for the writing project summer institutes, about the only time many teachers have left for writing is from 4 to 6 a.m.

Despite these pressures, many teachers do, of course, write. Much of this writing, however, tends to be personal and expressive. And while no one at the writing project would want to detract from these creative efforts, project leaders believe NWP's particular charge—to promote professional writing (which is also creative)—needs more attention.

As Boston Writing Project Director Joe Check puts it, "Teacher-consultants become teacher-leaders who have the knowledge and training to make important contributions to educational practice and policy. However, their contributions are rarely known beyond their own schools or districts because they do not write about their practice."

In 1998, three writing project directors, Check, Tom Fox of the Northern California Writing Project, and Carol Tateishi of the Bay Area Writing Project, began conversations to address this deficiency. Out of these talks came plans for the first National Writing Project Writing

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Retreat, held in the summer of 1999 at the Sunrise Springs Conference and Retreat Center near Santa Fe, New Mexico.

This lovely site was chosen by design. Said Tateishi, "We thought that it was important to find a place with few distractions. Most people need time and peace and quiet to work productively on their writing. We also knew we needed enough common space to bring the group together regularly." The group decided to begin the retreat on a Thursday afternoon, then let the "non-schedule" work its magic on Friday and Saturday, and conclude with a read-around on Sunday morning.

After the site was selected and the time agreed on, the next order of business was to invite applications. "We were looking for applicants who were either working on a piece of professional writing or had in mind a piece they did want to work on. We hoped also to get experienced writers who are willing to take criticism and give feedback to others. This kind of retreat isn't the best place for inexperienced writers," Fox said.

Check, Tateishi, and Fox would serve as facilitators and writing coaches at this first retreat, and an editor from NWP would also be on hand. The elements of this retreat, which have changed only marginally at the three subsequent retreats, are these: large chunks of time to write and to get feedback in response groups and from the coaches, shared meals, and a few whole-group sessions including brief progress reports from each participant.

This latter is a key element, said Check. "The check-ins provide a necessary degree of structure, a soft deadline to keep the writers moving forward in their work. Often writers from different response groups have advice or resources to offer each other as a result of these check-ins."

Of the final read-around, Fox said, "Of course, most pieces do not reach a final draft stage during the retreat itself, but we want to hear something from everyone—a paragraph or two, three to five minutes of work—to give a sense of the piece's development up to that point."

A few months later, participants in the retreat receive an anthology, edited by three volunteer publication coordinators, that includes writing from all the participants. At this stage, the work is described as an "intermediate publication" because, while it is expected that most of the writing will have progressed since participants last saw each other at the retreat, many of these contributions will still be works in progress.

Many of these writers continue to work on their writing, polishing it to a point where it can be made available to a national audience. Since the retreat's inception in 1999, the National Writing Project's publications have published over 20 pieces that have had origins at Santa Fe. And numerous pieces have been published elsewhere.

Joc Check commented, "Many of the writers who come to Santa Fe come to understand that their pieces are most appropriate for local publication, in school newsletters, or as an op-ed piece in the local newspaper. Santa Fe gives the writers a chance to figure out the audience they are really after."

But the site directors who sparked the idea of the Santa Fe retreat did not want the professional writing retreat concept to be restricted to the 25 applicants accepted each year for the Sunrise Springs conclave. So at the 2001 spring meeting, Tateishi, Check, and Fox, joined by Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, co-director of the National Writing Project of Acadia (Louisiana) who participated in the 1999 retreat and is now a facilitator-coach at Santa Fe, held a session to help sites launch their own writing retreats.

In attendance at the session was Janis Kramer, Oklahoma Writing Project co-director. Her site, in conjunction with the Oklahoma State University Writing Project, had promised the Oklahoma State Board of Education a new edition of Write Angles, a collection of writing

Following is a reflection on the 2002 NWP Writing Retreat from participant-writer Bill Connolly.

Wherever You Go, Writing Is Hard Work

by Bill Connolly

I am in a place of exquisite beauty, surrounded by a group of inspirational colleagues—all serious about the need and desire to write—and it's still so damn hard for me to write. I am sitting on a shaded patio, typing away on my laptop, with the liltting sounds of a distant musical troupe blending with the bubbling of nearby fountains... and yet I'm playing Space Invaders with my backspace key, trying to figure out how to end this very paragraph.

So I guess you can take a writer from the sea-level beauty of New Jersey and raise him 6,200 feet to this land of red rocks and dry heat, but you cannot necessarily elevate him to the mountains of writing ease. I lost myself in the desert grandeur of Santa Fe, but I could not hide from the truth: wherever you go, writing is hard work.

There is an odd comfort in that realization. It's affirming to know that the people with whom you work at the retreat—some who have published books, others who are embarking on projects of impressive depth and relevance—have their bad days. They, too, have their doubts about writing anything that anyone would ever want to read.

Do our students ever enjoy the affirming misery of that company? Just as some of us came here convinced that some clerical error or oversight had somehow landed us here among these more worthy, talented writers, how many of our students sit in their seats, thinking, "I'm the worst writer in the room"?

In the end, it's not really a question of competence. It's about the mythology of writing and, more often, the perfectionism of the writer. Myths are often based on elementary ideas, and so I say to my students with Forrest Gump-like simplicity, "A writer is someone who writes." This conflicts with their notion that writers are god-like figures who sit at long tables in the fronts of bookstores signing their latest best seller.

The myth that is harder to dispel is that any "real" writer does so effortlessly. Her pen is a fluent paintbrush of compositional brilliance; his nimble fingers dance across the keyboard like those of a piano virtuoso. It is the sad fate of the rest of us to slog.
strategies from teachers at these two projects. Said Kramer “We had made this commitment, but until I went to this session, I had no idea how we were going to carry it off. I came away inspired and, last February, 28 teacher-consultants from our sites met in Guthrie, Oklahoma, to get the work done. We followed as closely as we could the Santa Fe model, and it worked.” Recent issues of *The Quarterly* and *The Voice* have contained several pieces generated at the Oklahoma retreat with more to follow.

Retreats replicating the Santa Fe model have also been held by the Louisiana State Network and the Northwest Inland Writing Project in Idaho. Writers at both of these retreats have produced pieces published by NWP.

And the National Writing Project is also taking the retreat format in new directions. Following this year’s Santa Fe retreat, a group of teachers from the NWP English Language Learners Network arrived at Sunrise Springs to spend three days working on pieces following the still-emerging, but already successful retreat model. (See story at right.) Additionally, the decision was made to hold two NWP Writing Retreats next summer: one in the eastern part of the United States and one in the west.

The retreat facilitators—who were this year joined by Gwen Williams of the Peachtree Urban Writing Project (Georgia)—have prepared the National Writing Project Professional Writing Retreat Handbook, which will be available from NWP this winter. The booklet explains the writing retreat rationale and details the nuts and bolts of retreat organization.

And how will local leaders know if their replications of the Santa Fe model are successful? There will be, of course, the quantitative evaluations: How many teacher-consultants participated? How many pieces of writing were generated? But perhaps the ultimate test should take into consideration Santa Fe participant Tim Gillespie’s evaluation of the experience: “I was productive, energized, provoked, challenged, supported, and inspired.”

There is not a spa in America that, in three days, is going to make you feel *that* good.

through the muck and murkiness of our writing, hitting the save button with a sense of desperate futility. “What’s the point?” we wonder.

The point is simply to write. If I measure my success here at the retreat in number of articles accepted, book prospectus completed, or number of compliments from writing group members received, I should have stayed in the humidity and summer haze of South Jersey. What I must reflect upon proudly is the fact that I kept writing. I realized that the people around me were in the same wretched boat as I; all were rowing furiously, some were cresting waves and others were taking on water. Still, we kept rowing.

That’s all I want my students to do, and that’s all the leaders at Sunrise Springs asked of us. We eventually left our inner critics down by the meditation pool or back in our rooms, and we sat with our fellow writers who had come from north, south, east, and west. We listened, we wrote, and then we listened some more.

I came to Sunrise Springs with pieces of a book, and I return home with even more pieces but no whole. I do, however, have a greater sense of what that whole may be one day and a plan to continue my self-discovery as a writer. My writing group and Joe Check helped me realize that what was holding me back were issues for another time. For now, my job was to write.

In a little over a week, I will begin my leadership of one of our site’s summer institutes in a few months, I will be back in my classroom with new groups of young writers. My Santa Fe experiences will be a part of who I am and how I work with our participants and my students. In both groups, it is likely that few will have been to Santa Fe and none will have attended a summer writing retreat. As writers, though, they have all been there. No matter where you are, I will tell them, writing is just damn hard.

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