An Intern’s Summer Institute Experience

by Beth Hammett

I knew the Oklahoma Writing Project (OWP) summer institute involved seasoned teachers, but would OWP consider taking a recent graduate with no teaching experience? “Apply...apply...” were the words echoed by OWP’s Mike Angelotti and Cindy O’Donnell-Allen.

I filled out the application even though I had no prior teaching experience, no professional references in the field, and no confidence that I could teach the techniques learned in undergraduate classes. I wasn’t sure what kind of “teacher of teachers” I would be. But I applied anyway.

It was when I received a letter requesting my presence for an interview that I began to sweat. Sure, I was excited. But what would they tell the committee? I had had no “ah-ha” moments to relate, no profound reflections based on years of experience to record, no teacher research to present. I did not even have a class on which to practice.

When the big day arrived, I told the committee what teaching meant to me, how I wanted to help students succeed in life, how writing had helped me through tough times, and what I envisioned for my own classroom. To my surprise, I received the first internship position created by OWP for the 1999 summer institute at the University of Oklahoma.

The first two days of the summer institute were hectic. We introduced ourselves, did lots of creative writing, and talked about upcoming presentations. It was in awe of these teachers who were so enthusiastic about teaching and learning. Many participants told stories of hands-on applications in their classrooms and how relating real-life experiences to classroom learning had helped their students.

I struggled with poetry writing, similar to the students in these teachers’ classes. I had never been much for writing poetry, but the group was patient and nurtured me through the process of completing my poems. One of my group members, Margaret, made an honest assessment, “You’re not a great poet, but you’re a much better poet now.” She was right—I was no longer afraid to tackle poetry writing.

We discussed topics ranging from teaching the writing process to helping students realize their goals in life through writing. As our own writings began to take shape, my views on classroom teaching and learning were put into different perspectives. I discovered that textbook scenarios did not often cover true-to-life classroom situations.

When it came time to do a demonstration before the group, I was at a total loss. I did not have a class to track for development and had only my field experiences on which to rely. But when the group began asking me questions on undergraduate classes, I realized that what they wanted me to focus on was what was going on in literacy education now. Giving a presentation for the first time scared me, but I soon found myself eagerly waiting my turn in front of the group. After all, these teachers had become my mentors, and they were determined to help me flourish in my own classroom.

When I asked OWP members why they had included a first-year teacher, the answer surprised me. Sometimes veteran teachers get out of touch with what is being introduced and taught in the undergraduate certification programs. By having a recruit in their midst, OWP was able to reevaluate current practices and reflect on changes in teaching methods of the past.

So I guess my presence made a contribution, which is only fair, as I brought so much away from the OWP experience through the new and creative teaching practices to which I was introduced. However, the biggest benefit of being an OWP summer institute member is in having seasoned teachers as friends with whom I can share ideas while developing innovative teaching methods.

Being a teacher and a writer has taken on new meaning since becoming a member of the Oklahoma Writing Project.

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of honest critique, born out of the best intentions, out of, indeed, resonance. This makes a wealth of difference. I feel full again with words to write, with desire and excitement and faith.

References


Melanie Taormina is a teacher-consultant with the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project.