Writing Workshop and Contest for Students and Teachers Helps Site Achieve Goals

by Janis Cramer

Like many other writing project sites, the Oklahoma Writing Project (OWP) has established a daunting set of goals. When we advanced these ambitious plans some years ago, we had no idea we would be able to move toward accomplishing many of these objectives in one fell swoop. The catalyst for this accomplishment was our writing workshop and contest for students and teachers. This combination activity motivates both students and teachers to write, provides a showcase for our teacher-consultants’ demonstrations, garners positive publicity for our site, advertises our inservice workshops and writing camps, involves our retired teacher-consultants, raises funds for our site, and, most importantly, recruits good teachers for our summer institute.

Now in its sixth year, our workshop/contest has most recently involved 250 students and 40 teachers. In September, we send out fliers to schools across the state announcing a writing workshop for teachers and students. The flyer also mentions a writing contest, which is open to all students and teachers in the state. The submissions are due in January, and participants in our workshop get a jump start on this competition. Each teacher who attends may bring up to five students. We assume that any teacher who comes with students to this kind of workshop will be a receptive candidate for OWP activities, so when the teachers show up, we make sure that each receives a packet that includes a flyer about our site and its mission, an invitation to the summer institute, a catalogue of OWP presentations for each teacher to take back to the inservice committee in her district, and fliers advertising all the OWP-sponsored activities for the upcoming school year. Also included is the participant information sheet, which each teacher fills out. This allows us to notify teachers of additional inservice opportunities sponsored by our site.

Then the workshops, presented by our teacher-consultants, begin. Many of the workshops for students focus on generating ideas for the writing contest genres. At the most recent workshop, Doris Dewberry gave a demonstration titled “I Would Love To Write If Only I Had Something To Say,” which helped students find ways to overcome writer’s block. Pat Lightfoot presented “Life Sentences: A Journey into the Interior,” a demonstration that showed students how to explore their individuality, insights, and interests through narrative expression. Freeda Richardson’s demonstration “Did You Ever See a Poem Ride a Bus?” presented a strategy for writing poetry about common experiences. [The box on page 21 spotlights a winning poem begun during this session.]

Other workshops helped students focus on revision. I, for instance, presented “How Stingy Was She?” to help students substitute action details for adjectives when developing characters in short stories. (See box, below left.) Still other workshops, such as Pat Strum’s “Turn Your Essay into a Yes-Say,” gave advice for creating papers that can rise to the top of the stack when examined by the writing contest judges.

While the student workshops focus on how to write, the teacher workshops focus on how to teach. These recent sessions included topics such as Krista Harrison’s “A Blast in the Past: Writing in the Social Studies Classroom” and Joni Hamilton’s “Using America’s Great Speeches to Teach Composition.”

After lunch, we hold a joint session for all participants, which, among other activities, gives students and teachers the chance to write together to the same prompts. We encourage lots of sharing in small groups. The students always seem to enjoy seeing their teachers as writers and often volunteer their teachers to read their writing to the whole audience. The teachers, of course, encourage their students to share with the large group, too.

Stage Is Set for the Writing Contest

The packets we hand out to both student and teacher participants also include contest entry information. At the students’ orientation, we urge the young writers to take one of the writings they begin that day back to school to revise and enter in the contest.

In the joint session at the close of the day, we remind the audience of the January deadline for the writing contest and we tell them that the
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read their winning pieces to the audience. Each teacher and student who attends the spring workshop receives an anthology of the winning writings.

Experiment Proves Successful

What started as an experiment has met so many of our site's goals that we know these workshops and the writing contest will become a tradition with us. Three of the teachers who attended last year's session became teacher-consultants through our summer institute, claiming they would never have known about the OWP had it not been for the workshops and the writing contest.

Nothing we have offered has had such a positive impact on teachers and students as our annual writing contest and teacher/student writing workshops. And nothing has met the mission and goals of our site in such a productive and enjoyable way. Satisfying feedback on this two-part endeavor came back to the OWP last year from the parent of one of the student-participants. "My son went straight home and started writing a short story," the parent told us. "Now this is a boy who is a good student, who does his homework, but who never goes above and beyond what the teacher demands in class. When I asked him what he was up to, he told me, 'I plan to win next year's writing contest, so I better get to work now.'"

What better evidence of success could we want?

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For questions on the writing workshop and contest or to obtain copies of the workshop and contest flers, contact Janice Cramer, co-director of the Oklahoma Writing Project, University of Oklahoma, College of Education, 820 Van Vleet Oval, Norman, OK 73019. Cramer can also be reached by phone at 405/943-4903 or by email at cramje@oklahom.net.

One of the winning poems from the 2001 writing contest, inspired by Freeda Richardson's poetry workshop.

Paranoia

Paranoia walks into a party, eyes darting in all directions. Paranoia sits in a chair and keeps looking around. Someone is watching.

Paranoia reaches for a cracker and retracts his hand. It might be poison. Paranoia always expects the worst.

Paranoia hears someone whispering behind him, Plotting something against him.

Paranoia has smooth, ice-cold skin And never lets anyone get close enough to touch.

Paranoia tastes like a mouthful of cotton: Bland, dry, and unable to be swallowed.

Paranoia smells suspiciously smoky Like something burning on the stove, Or could it be a fire in the attic?

Stacey, seventh grade, Weatherford Middle School