ELL Network Reports on Minigrant Projects

by DANA DUSHBIER with reports from JUDITH DOHERTY, WILMA ORTIZ, and KAREN SUMARYONO

The members of the English Language Learners Network leadership team met in Albany, Wisconsin, this summer to celebrate a second year together as one of the newest networks of the National Writing Project. One of the network’s earliest goals was to initiate important discussions about language learners and how they best learn to write and read. The leadership team hoped that the mix of its representation (team members come from California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Minnesota) would allow the network to reach sites across the country that are struggling with the same issues and begin a dialogue that would be ongoing and actively advocate for the educational rights of immigrant students.

To further this goal, the ELL Network funded its first group of minigrants last year, and this year’s projects are now underway. The sites that applied and received funding, both last year and for the current year, put together exciting projects that allow teachers the opportunity to come together and examine best practices, read and discuss current research, and begin dialogues around advocacy and reform. The ELL Network is pleased to share news of these projects, beginning in this issue with reports from the Boston Area Writing Project and Western Massachusetts Writing Project.

Report from the Boston Writing Project

The focus of the Boston Writing Project’s (BWP) ELL Network minigrant proposal, funded in 2001, was to develop ELL teacher-leaders in three areas: publication, public speaking, and facilitation. Initial planning sessions with three bicultural teachers (all of whom were already strong leaders at the BWP) were productive, insightful, and inspiring, as the candor of such leaders shaped program ideas. One suggestion was to welcome and support leadership initiatives of ELL teachers along with leadership development as a whole at the BWP, not in isolation.

Small-Group Initiatives

At our first small-group occasion, twelve teachers wrote, shared drafts, and discussed leadership ideas. Surprisingly none of those teachers submitted minigrant applications. But out of this work, we funded five leadership initiatives: three writing groups, one school site study group, and an international connection with educators in Peru. Next step: Offer two ELL teachers a chance to facilitate at our summer institutes.

Public Speaking

Our aim in this area was to develop a cadre of trained consultants who would prepare the sites that applied and received funding, both last year and for the current year, put together exciting projects that allow teachers the opportunity to come together and examine best practices, read and discuss current research, and begin dialogues around advocacy and reform.

workshops on ELL instruction for mainstream educators to use in professional development conferences and at faculty meetings. BWP co-director Deana Lew hosted a four-part series of workshops: What Makes a Good Workshop?, Group Coaching Based on Teacher-Led Workshop Proposals, Modeling Workshops to Generate Feedback, and Designing Flyers to Advertise Workshops. Six teachers from the 2001 summer institute attended, but none of them was an ELL instructor. Teacher-consultants Olga Frechon and Ric Calleja offered a Saturday session for new leaders to learn more about presenting. After mailing invitations to about 50 teachers from the bilingual institutes, the day was canceled because it had not generated sufficient interest. Next step: Invite two ELL teachers to present an area of expertise at the bilingual institute this year with individual coaching and support provided by Olga Frechon.

Publication

To encourage submissions by ELL teachers to the BWP newsletter, book collection, and literary magazine, we conducted a review of anthologies produced by teachers at ELL institutes. From among these, we selected three articles for revision toward publication. In another effort, we sent personal notes to other ELL teachers asking them to submit pieces for publication, but this effort has not generated submissions to date.

Closings and Openings

We have mixed reviews at the close of the year. Bicultural leaders who were already involved in the BWP became more deeply involved in some of these areas. For example Ric Calleja, a Brookline High Spanish teacher, and Adelina da Silva, a literacy teacher at Madison Park Vocational High in Boston, are vital members of the publication committee that selects and edits manuscripts for our book collection. Yet, it remains to be seen what new openings we can create that will excite new ELL teachers to get actively involved in our network.

Submitted by Judith Doherty.

Report from the Western Massachusetts Writing Project

Through funding provided by a minigrant awarded this year, the Western Massachusetts Writing Project hosted a three-day mini-institute for teachers of English language learners (ELL) in July. Held at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, conference workshops centered on ways to affirm students’ cultures and the use of their native languages by connecting writing and literature to their lives.

Writing guru Peter Elbow joined the group for a special workshop on writing, voice, and identity. He advocated having English language learners write in their mother tongue when freewriting before transferring—not translating—the ideas into an English format. “Unless we write in the language that is in touch with our unconscious, we lose half our mental strength,” Elbow said.

He concluded that he is convinced that the best way to prepare students for standardized essay tests is by providing lots of freewriting.

Teacher-consultants Bonnie Tipaldi and Robyn Waryn, two teachers who developed curriculum units at last summer’s two-week ELL institute, “Writing for All,” returned to give workshops on the units they implemented during the school year. Seventeen teachers joined the Western Massachusetts ELL Network through their participation in the institute.

Institute leaders Karen Sumaryono and Wilma Ortiz conducted guided readings, sharing and responding groups, and workshops on
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strategies to help English language learners achieve academic success. In addition, each teacher received a copy of the book, Reading and Writing in More Than One Language: Lessons for Teachers, edited by Elizabeth Franklin (TESOL Publications), which contains articles that illustrate the importance of cultural identity and the native language in the acculturation process necessary for academic success.

The three days culminated in sharing best practices and reading from an anthology of teachers’ writing generated in the mini-institute. Participants demonstrated their passion for teaching and writing as well as their commitment to engage ELL students in the learning process. Submitted by Karen Sumaryono and Wilma Ortiz.

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Write for The Voice!

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Judith Doherty has been a teacher for 20 years. A teacher-consultant with the Boston Writing Project, she was co-director from 1996 to 2000.

Wilma Ortiz teaches eighth grade English language learners at Amherst Middle School, a Turning Points school. She is a teacher-consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.

Karen L. Sumaryono currently teaches language arts to English language learners at West Springfield High School. She is a teacher-consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.