Setting Your Sites
Thoughts on Being a New NWP Site

Editors’ Note: New sites are added to the National Writing Project network every year. In 2001, the network welcomed eight: Florida Gulf Coast Writing Project, Georgia Southern Writing Project, Hudson Valley Writing Project (New York), Live Oak Writing Project (Mississippi), Meadow Brook Writing Project (Michigan), Sun Belt Writing Project (Alabama), UC Merced Writing Project (California), and Upstate Writing Project (South Carolina). So, what’s it like being a brand new writing project site? What are the hurdles, the triumphs? Pondering such questions, NWP editors asked Elaine White, director of the Live Oak Writing Project, and she graciously agreed to answer. Following is her thoughtful response.

BY J. ELAINE WHITE

I sit at my desk, office lights turned off, door closed. Silence. I lean back and stretch, pushing away from the desk, which is covered with notepads, papers, and books filled with notes. We have just completed the pre-institute sessions for our first invitational summer institute, and it was good. I smile to myself as I think of the journey of the past 10 months that has brought me to this place—the Live Oak Writing Project (LOWP).

Where It Began
To be accurate, the journey began in 1992 when I became a fellow in the Oklahoma Writing Project (OWP) at the University of Oklahoma. I was a graduate student working on my doctorate, and Mike Angelotti, director of OWP, was my major professor. He urged me to become part of the project, and the prospect of six hours of graduate credit was too good to refuse. I was hooked after the first day of our summer institute. As for many teacher-consultants (TCs), it was an experience that changed my life as a writer and a teacher. I “became” that summer. I became a writer and a teacher of writing. I learned how to examine my practice, how to identify and incorporate best practice, and how to use research to verify and expand what I knew about good teaching. The best teaching of my 25 years in public schools occurred in the last 6 years of that career and was a direct result of what I had learned in OWP.

When I decided to enter university teaching and interviewed with the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), Jeanne Ezell, the director of the South Mississippi Writing Project, talked with me about her site’s work. I shared my writing project experience with her, indicating that if I were hired by USM, I would be interested in helping with her site. Little did I know what lay ahead when I was offered the position.

For seven years, Jeanne had been conducting two summer institutes—one on the USM home campus in Hattiesburg and the other on the Gulf Coast campus in Long Beach. Although both institutes were growing under her leadership, supervising two each summer was becoming an unmanageable task. Initially, Jeanne enlisted the help of Co-directors Mary Kay Deen and Frances Weller, and they shouldered much of the responsibility for the Gulf Coast institute. But when the number of TCs in the three coastal counties surpassed 90, Jeanne felt that it was time for USM Gulf Coast to apply to become its own writing project site. Both the National Writing Project (NWP) and the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute (MWTI, our state network) supported her thinking.

Unaware of what was unfolding, I was sitting in my Oklahoma living room that June trying to organize my worldly belongings into categories (“garage sale” and “pack to move”) when my telephone rang. It was Joe Thrash, chair of the Division of Arts and Sciences at USM Gulf Coast.

“Dr. White,” he began, “I understand that you have been active in the Oklahoma Writing Project.”

“Yes,” I answered. “That’s very special group to me.”

“Good, good,” he continued. “I’d like for you to think about something. Now, you don’t need to rush into a commitment here. As a matter of fact, I don’t want to put any pressure on you. But would you be interested in becoming the director of a National Writing Project site here on our campus?”

I shouted, “Oh, yes!” into the receiver. Looking back, if I had known the enormity of the task I was undertaking, I might have hesitated a moment, but I would not have refused the offer. I was too passionate about the writing project to let such an opportunity slip by.

Dr. Thrash assured me that Jeanne was enthusiastic about the idea of the new site, that the administration at USM Gulf Coast was supportive, and that the two co-directors who would help me (Mary Kay and Frances) had already begun to work on a proposal—which was due September 15. I calculated quickly: I was moving to Mississippi August 1; I was to be on campus August 15. We would have one month to complete the application. I could make it work.

Admittedly, the transition was not easy. We had barely completed our move and began to unpack when the first semester was upon us. With the deadline for the NWP new-site application looming, I was adjusting to a new job, preparing frantically to teach my classes, and trying to figure out where on earth I had packed my favorite toothbrush. Fortunately, Frances and Mary Kay had already acquired matching funds, prepared a budget, solicited letters of support, and began writing the application. After I arrived, the three of us spent evenings and weekends working on the proposal—writing, revising, discarding, and starting over again. Once we had completed our text, I began the university end of the application. To my horror, this was almost as time-consuming as all of our work to that point. Being new to university teaching, I had no idea of the amount of red tape one encounters when writing grant proposals. But working as quickly as possible, we managed to squeeze our application into the mail just before the deadline. If we hadn’t been so exhausted, we would have been jubilant.

As we waited to hear the results of our application, Sherry Swain, MWTI director, encouraged us to make plans to attend the
National Writing Project Annual Meeting, which was being held in Milwaukee. Imagine our excitement when, just before leaving for the meeting, we received word that our application had been accepted. We were going to have our own site—the Live Oak Writing Project. Now, we were jubilant.

A Writing Project Emerges
From my experiences in Oklahoma, I knew how much work it takes to run a successful writing project site. But until our proposal was accepted, the thought of being a site director was just that—a thought. Now, with the realization that we were going to be funded and that I was actually going to be the director, I was seized by numbing panic. How would I ever be able to do all that was required for Live Oak to be successful? On top of that, how would I be able to build LOWP and meet the requirements for my tenure-track position at USM Gulf Coast?

Once my initial panic subsided, I began to think clearly again. I realized that the strength of the national organization and the credibility of the NWP model would be the two things I could focus on as we began our work. We would draw on the expertise of TCs, involving others who were passionate about NWP and who wanted to become part of the Live Oak Writing Project.

To set this plan in motion, I spoke with the public relations director at USM Gulf Coast, explaining what the Live Oak Writing Project was and how it could impact our campus. Together, we organized a reception to announce the establishment of our site. The public relations department reserved a room on campus for the reception and printed invitations that we sent to legislators, business executives, school superintendents, principals, and potential donors. We also invited as many of the TCs in the three coastal counties as we could contact. Public relations also composed and distributed press releases to the area newspapers, contacted TV and radio stations, and even provided refreshments for the event.

About a third of the people we invited turned out that afternoon. There was an air of excitement as our campus vice president, Dr. James Williams, introduced the Live Oak Writing Project and read a statement reiterating the university’s support of it. The project felt real.

Next Steps
I began to build a database containing the names and addresses of TCs in our area. I wrote a letter to each explaining how and why our site was established and encouraging them to participate. I included a Teacher-Consultant Update sheet on which I elicited not only addresses and telephone numbers, but also specific information about the activities in which each TC wanted to be involved as we created our site. Again, about one-third of the TCs responded.

In February 2001, Mary Kay, Frances, and I traveled to Plymouth Bluff, Mississippi, for a visioning retreat sponsored by the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute. We spent three days with the directors and co-directors of the seven other Mississippi writing project sites as well as other educators and institute staff members. The retreat gave us the opportunity to collaborate with the people who had established writing project work in our state and who were willing to share their expertise with us. The state network, we soon realized, is a valuable resource.

Finally, my co-directors and I prepared flyers and application forms for our first summer institute. We sent them to every TC, superintendent, and principal on our list, requesting that they share the information with teachers whom they thought would be good candidates. As I began receiving calls about the summer institute, I explained what was involved in becoming a fellow. I emphasized that we expected a five-week commitment and lots of hard work. As a result of our contacts and publicity, we had 30 interested applicants.

Finding the Focus
At this point in our development, two events helped us focus and refine our progress: a site visit from national representatives and the NWP Directors Retreat.

For the site visit, which happened in April, Richard Louth, from the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, and Sherry Swain came to visit. I had called Sherry in advance to ask about an agenda for the visit.

"It’s whatever you want," Sherry answered. "This is your party. You decide what you need."

Richard and Sherry arrived on a Thursday morning, and the three of us talked almost constantly their entire stay. Wit and wisdom filled their stories about experiences they had had as site directors. In almost every example or suggestion, Richard and Sherry pointed me toward the model. "It just works," Richard would say. "You can’t improve on something that good. Any time I tried to modify the model, it was a disaster!"
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how to manage my time so that I could meet the research and publication requirements of my university. Mary Ann Smith, co-director of NWP and director of the California Writing Project state network, suggested that I might use my experiences as site director to pull together research and write articles to satisfy university expectations. I left the retreat confident about what we would be able to accomplish and impressed with the quality of training and mentoring the national organization provides.

LOWP—One Year Down . . .

Today, as I sit in my office and replay the events of our pre-institute sessions, I am pleased with the progress we've made. I am excited about the potential I see in this group of fellows and the TCs already involved in the Live Oak Writing Project. I am relieved to know that I don't have to—nor should I—carry the entire weight and responsibility of our site's work and growth. I am also thrilled to be a part of the larger organization—the National Writing Project—and to share not only in the reputation and respect NWP is afforded but also to share in the work we have to do.

It's been a challenging year. We have worked hard to lay the foundation for our site, and we have so much more to do. We must grow staff development programs with our cadre of TCs. We must plan and provide continuity activities that are meaningful and relevant. We must seek out and enlist people who will diversify our group. We must develop TCs who are capable and eager to invest their time in LOWP. We must read, and plan, and work. But we do none of this in isolation. We are part of a larger organization that believes in the value of each individual writing project site—an organization that wants us to succeed and is willing to invest in us—an organization that is itself part of our community of writers and teachers. Through the training and mentoring provided by NWP, we have been given the tools and training that we need to be successful.

The logo for our site is the beautifully gnarled, luxuriously foliaged live oak tree—the kind that grows prolifically along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. These trees have survived centuries of hurricanes, droughts, and floods. Yet they stand tall and magnificent, proud and solid. This year, we planted our seed for the Live Oak Writing Project. We've planted it in good soil. We are going to cultivate it carefully, making sure that it is deeply rooted in the NWP model. We are going to nourish it with teacher leadership from our coastal area. And years from now, when we have become a well-established site, we will stand tall and magnificent, proud and solid.

J. Elaine White is director of the new Live Oak Writing Project at the University of Southern Mississippi, Gulf Coast. (Read more on J. Elaine White as part of “Moving in New Directions,” page 16.)