

Compiling “Favorite Authors” List Proves No Easy Task

BY JOAN TAYLOR



As avid as National Writing Project folks are about writing, they are equally enthusiastic about reading, especially reading about writing. With very little encouragement—okay, with absolutely NO encouragement—NWP teacher-consultants (TCs) share books, titles, and favorite authors at every NWP get-together.

For the past two years, NWP has given its network the opportunity to examine these very topics through the Authors and Issues Online Conference, a series of online discussions about writing instruction and the writing life. In addition to the ongoing conversations (to which participants are able to log on day or night), the conferences feature guest authors who make presentations, participate in question-and-answer sessions, and join in the online talk. Guest authors for the first two conferences were Donald Murray and Ralph Fletcher, respectively.

Over the course of these conferences, we polled participants for suggestions of authors who might be well-received by NWP communities. As unscientific and incomplete as our poll was, it does give a snapshot of what some site directors and TCs are considering in their rich and varied readings—useful information, especially as we approach the time for this year’s summer institutes.

Some people just couldn’t choose a single author . . . so many good readings, so little time. Mary Baron of the Jaxwrite Writing Project (Florida) asked, “May I have two votes? Anne Lamott and Annie Dillard.” Third Coast Writing Project’s (Michigan) Ellen Brinkley offered, “How about Nancie Atwell? Or Tom Romano? Or Linda Rief? I’d love to hear them talk about their teaching of writing.” Suzanne Cherry, from the Swamp Fox Writing Project (South Carolina) said, “I think Don Murray would be a good choice, but so would Gwen Gong or Valerie Balester.” TCs at the Maryland Writing Project suggested the following to Barbara Bass: Annie Dillard, Lisa Delpit, Parker Palmer, Phillip Pulman, J.K. Rowling, Natalie Goldberg, Anne Lamott, Louise Erdrich, Anne Tyler, Julia Cameron, Barry Lane, or Ralph Fletcher.

As evidenced by the list from Maryland, writers who discuss the teaching of writing were not the only writers considered. Nancy Zuercher from the Dakota Writing Project suggested alternating a writing teacher with a writer who isn’t

connected directly in writing pedagogy, someone who is known as a writer. “Someone, say, like Mem Fox or Gary Paulsen or Louise Erdrich or Sandra Cisneros?” Zuercher suggested. Margrethe Ahlschwede, West Tennessee Writing Project, suggested Hephzibah Roskelly for a slightly different slant. Ahlschwede’s site is reading *Unquiet Pedagogy*, of which Roskelly is one of the authors. She also offered Deborah Meier, author of *The Power of Their Ideas*.

A number of respondents favored an encore by Donald Murray, NWP’s first online author. Tish McGonegal, National Writing Project at Vermont, declared, “How could we do better than have Don Murray again?” Two directors, Marianne Darr Norman of the Indiana Writing Project and Jean Siewicki from the Lowcountry Writing Project (South Carolina) suggested we have both Donald Murray and Ralph Fletcher. Fletcher, our number one choice, receiving almost half of all the votes, obliged us by posting a piece of his writing with a response he’d received from Murray during his online conference.

When all votes were tallied, the following authors received numerous votes: Ralph Fletcher, Anne Lamott, Donald Murray, Barry Lane, Jeff Wilhelm, Tom Newkirk, and Tom Romano. Additional authors mentioned included Annie Dillard, Natalie Goldberg, Regie Routman, Linda Rief, Deborah Meier, Michele Cossou, Lucy Calkins, Gwen Gong, Valerie Balester, Nancie Atwell, Georgia Heard, Lynn Nelson, Julie Cameron, Peter Elbow, Robert Scholes, Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein, and Guy Claxton. Clearly, the list could become endless. NWP tastes and preferences for authors on writing are diverse and far from exclusive. Could the list have been easier to compile if instead we had polled NWP sites on authors they would NOT like to read?

Theresa Manthey from the North Virginia Writing Project, after nominating three authors, summed it up, “Hey, I know I’m not helping. Face it; we writing junkies will chat with anyone who has a good idea to share.”

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