New Jacket

by Kathleen Ann Gonzalez

When you buy a new jacket, you put it on and then look at yourself from all sides. "Does it fit right?" you ask yourself. "Is it too tight in the shoulders? Do the long sleeves make me look Neanderthal? Do the elbow patches look pomeous?" You brush yourself off, straighten the lapel, and put your hands in the pockets, trying to look your best. This past summer, I metaphorically tried on a new jacket—by taking on a new job. I became the co-director of the San Jose Area Writing Project's (SJAWP) summer institute.

At first, the job felt as awkward and glaring as chartreuse polyester, which may have been due, in part, to the fact that the opportunity presented itself at the last minute. I had already made my summer plans and bought my plane tickets. But when Jonathan Lovell, who had directed SJAWP's summer institute for 14 years, called me and said I was the first choice for the open co-director's position, I couldn't refuse. I was flattered, honored, and a bit astonished that he and Charleen Delfino, who I was replacing as she moved to a statewide writing project position, wanted me. Not just anybody . . . me.

When the request came, I was finishing my 10th year teaching high school English. I had gone through the summer institute as a participant four years earlier, and I had been teaching workshops as a teacher-consultant for the SJAWP ever since. My success with these workshops would make me a good mentor for other teacher-consultants in training. I was also just finishing the process to become a nationally certified teacher through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Also valuable in Jonathan's eyes, was the difficult experience I had had with my afternoon response group when I was a summer institute fellow. He thought that this perspective might help me understand and eliminate the problems response groups sometimes experience.

That, in fact, was one of the first obstacles Jonathan and I tackled when I became the summer institute co-director. Before the institute began, he and I read through the previous year's evaluations to identify problem areas. Fourth grade teacher Tahira Monroe had written, "Our group had great discussions but needed more structure and a person to take the role to keep us on task." First grade teacher Traci Elam-Gordon lamented, "We fumbled along without direction and spent most of our time debriefing the morning workshops." She had hoped to do more writing and responding, which are the prime goals of these afternoon groups. I wondered what made some groups inherently successful while others imploded after three weeks. Should the co-directors take a more prescriptive role halfway through the institute? Could we create a structure from the outset that would provide participants with a set of tools to tackle problems on their own?

I quickly became fired up. My know-it-all teacher mode kicked in, and I started popping out answers. I thought back to my total quality learning (TQL) training the previous summer through which we had learned to use problem-solving tools. Response groups could go through the purpose and vision statement process to create a list of norms their group would follow to keep them on track. Creating this list would also build community within the group as they problem-solved together. For groups that didn't want that much structure to their process, I offered alternatives, such as simply listing their norms via a scribe or having each member state the one thing he or she needed from the group.

When I presented these options to our summer institute group, along with a list of possible group norms, they responded favorably. Georgett Gummins later commented, "I learned what my students feel as they see their group not working and not producing the desired effect. I know now how to point them in some directions to help organize and centralize group work." Experiencing a response group first-hand helped all participants understand their students' needs more fully.

Most groups tried at least one of these suggested methods, spending their first afternoon working out a plan. But some issues were already brewing, just like our "leaded" and "unleaded" coffee pots each morning. Jonathan and I heard from some people within the first couple days that they were experiencing difficulty focusing on each other's writing. We talked to individuals to let them vent and to help develop solutions. As much as possible, we wanted groups to solve their problems from within. "Or put it on the parking lot," I suggested. This was another TQL method I had learned. It was simple enough: a poster divided into four quadrants representing issues, positives, questions, and improvements. Participants could write their concerns on sticky notes and post them anonymously. That way, they could avoid direct confrontation or hurting the feelings of a response group member.

Jonathan or I would bring up an issue before the group, such as reminding participants that they had a responsibility to their group members to respond to each other's writing. Katrina Candiano also suggested that we could use a mailbox for weekly anonymous responses.

The third week of the summer institute is when groups typically started imploding. To our relief, our participants wrote that week that everything was going very well; they had no problems to report. On her evaluation, Lisa Mastroianni wrote, "My group is great. Talented people. Interesting people. Great at responding to writing. Comfort level to share is there. I am learning and growing a lot because I have this support/response group."

"Woohoo!" I exclaimed, parroting Homer Simpson. This response encompassed everything I hoped our participants would have the good fortune to experience.

The "new jacket" was proving to be a good fit. When I stood before this group of 23 K–college teachers, they found value in what I was presenting. However, I still needed to prove myself in another arena—our one-on-one sessions with the fellows. During afternoon sessions, individuals would sign up to meet with me and Jonathan to work out their presentation ideas. Our goal was to help participants narrow the focus of their presentations and make sure each presentation included participatory activities, strategies, and reference to the presenter's teaching philosophy. On a number of continued on next page
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days (which I discovered later was by his deliberate design), Jonathan needed to take care of other business, so I was forced to meet with the participant by myself. Initially, the thought of going it alone daunted me. “Would people be disappointed that they didn’t get to meet with Jonathan?” I wondered. “Would they see me as second best? An imposter? Would my advice come across as intelligent and helpful? Would I be able to convincingly and authoritatively fill out the role I had taken on?”

In spite of my doubts, the consultations went well. I love to work with teachers to hone their craft, and an alpha-teacher attitude rises up from within me to dream up better lesson ideas than I can create for my own classes. Maybe this alter-ego taps into an invisible vein of super-teacher strategies that fly though the air like so many radio waves. Wherever it comes from, it seems to work. For instance, for Angela Cardamom’s presentation, I encouraged her to consider the use of videos in the second grade classroom not just as a time filler but as a viable literacy tool. Michelle Feeney and I organized her ideas around her “apple” theme for teaching whole language, and I helped Bev Bartell see where she could include activities for summer institute participants to experience. Summer institute participants said that these consultations proved valuable, helping them to find the clarity and direction they needed to create their presentations. Heather Hebard added, “It gave me a lot of confidence knowing that they [Jonathan and Kathy] thought the workshop would go well.”

My position as co-director made me a leader and gave me the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience with other teachers, helping to train them to go on and present their ideas to others. But beneath the fabric of this role is the underlying success of the writing project—giving teachers the opportunity for professional growth and validation for their work. As we all know, there simply aren’t enough ways to recognize teachers for their hard work and success. There is little upward movement or incentive to challenge oneself and one’s methods. The pay scale is set and is based on years of service rather than on merit. Teachers who want to advance go into administration or leave the classroom in some other way.

But what about those of us who love the classroom and our kids? What about those who want to grow, challenge ourselves, and advance ourselves as professionals? For many of us, the answer is the writing project summer institute, which gives us the opportunity to become teacher-consultants, and, this past summer, offered me the chance to grow even more through the position of co-director. Jonathan and Charleen entrusted me with this opportunity, and I thank them and the 23 summer institute participants for letting me try it on for size. Even with as unfamiliar and awkward as it felt at first, this is one role I’m proud to take on.

Kathleen Ann Gonzalez teaches English at Santa Teresa High School in San Jose, California. She is a diversity coordinator for her school and writing contest coordinator for her district. Besides presenting workshops for the San Jose Area Writing Project, Gonzalez has also recently earned her National Board Certification.