NWP Adds Teacher Voices to Standards Debate

BY ART PETERSON

Focus on Standards (FOS), a network of teacher-leaders from National Writing Project sites in California and Washington, has recently completed three years of work that has brought a fresh perspective to the standards debate.

Directed by Jayne Marlink, NWP associate director, and funded by the Stuart Foundation, Focus on Standards has drawn on the expertise of teachers from four sites in California (the Area 3 Writing Project, the San Diego Area Writing Project, the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, and the UCLA Writing Project) and two sites in Washington (the Central Washington Writing Project and the Puget Sound Writing Project).

From the beginning, FOS teachers were motivated by the perception that, in general, teachers were being left out of the standards discussion. These teachers were interested in creating a more informed conversation about standards...
As the group worked, its members became increasingly aware of the complexity of the issue. This complexity, they found, was not often reflected in the statements of politicians or in the attempts by school districts to implement standards in the schools where these teachers worked. The group needed a language to describe this complexity, and, with the help of Mark St. John, Laura Stokes, and Barbara Heenan of Inverness Research Associates, FOS worked out a schema to demonstrate that the questions related to standards are necessarily complicated and that simple answers won’t do. (See diagram below.)

Part of the complexity the Inverness researchers pointed to relates to the understanding that standards in education are a multi-faceted proposition. Teachers confront public standards such as those issued by the state as well as the standards of their profession. Further, they are motivated by their personal standards—those expectations that they have established for themselves and their students.

Teachers must then add to this stew another series of questions revolving around ways to measure the progress of individual students—questions such as “Should I rely solely on formal achievement tests or should long-term studies of individual student work also be part of the mix?” “And when I do, by whatever means, identify a student’s needs, what do I do then?” Teachers need to know, as the Inverness researchers stated, how to “prescribe instructional ‘remedies’ that are particular to individual students.”

FOS teachers decided to address these complexities not as abstractions but as concerns placed in the context of the day-to-day professional decisions teachers need to make, decisions that are either not acknowledged by the larger community or are presented in simplistic terms.

Here is some of what the FOS teachers learned.

**Productive implementation of standards depends on teacher knowledge.**

The experience of FOS teacher Brooke Nicolls is a case in point. Nicolls teaches in an urban high school, ranked at the lowest level of California’s Academic Performance Index, where 60 percent of the students come from homes with a first language other than English.

During her first year of work with FOS, Nicolls moved to develop a sequence of lessons intended to help students meet the state’s academic writing standards, progressing from narrative essays to reflective ones to analytic writing. As a teacher of academic writing, Nicolls embarked on this project with confidence. But during the second year of her FOS work, she realized that if her students were to write about passages of non-fiction and expository prose, as they would be required to do when they were tested on the state standards, they would need to be able to comprehend these passages in a way most of them could not. She knew she had to construct a very different instructional program. “But,” she says, “like most high school teachers, my knowledge of how to teach students to read non-fiction texts was sketchy. I felt incompetent as a teacher.” During this second year, even though Nicolls’s knowledge of teaching allowed her to see what her students needed—that is to learn how to read and use expository texts—she says she needed professional knowledge about reading that she did not have.

The FOS teachers also came to realize that, in order to implement standards, teachers need not only professional knowledge but also knowledge of how to work with particular students. Donna Walker is a middle school teacher of mathematics and a teacher-consultant for both mathematics and writing projects. Increasingly, her class includes more students from non-English speaking backgrounds, especially Hmong and Vietnamese students. As an FOS teacher, Walker experimented to find the best ways to help students use what they knew about revising writing to rethink their mathematical learning. As a result, the scores of her English-speaking students improved on district exams. The scores of her English language learners (ELL) also improved, but not as significantly as the scores of her other students.

“T did not know enough about my ELL students’ use of the language to help them in the way I was able to help my other students,” Walker says. But her work with FOS has given her the opportunity to examine this gap in her knowledge. “Otherwise I might not have realized what I needed to learn to improve my teaching for the benefit of all my students,” Walker says. “I am learning how to make content accessible to my student regardless of their language background. This has become my passion.”

**A teacher’s personal and professional standards may exceed those imposed by the state and school district.**

Examples such as Walker’s make clear the fact that public standards cannot be separated from a teacher’s personal standards. Dawn Imamoto teaches second grade at an urban elementary school with a majority of ELL students who speak first languages as diverse as Russian and Hmong.

For second-graders, California has only two writing standards—
students are expected to write friendly letters, and they are required to write brief narratives based on personal experience. Imamoto’s school district lowered the bar further. To demonstrate grade-level proficiency in her district, students needed only to write a letter. Imamoto was able to accomplish this goal in a month. This left her plenty of time to bring to her students other things she believed they needed to know. She thought it was important for her students to know not only how to write a letter but about the uses to which letters could be put. She studied the standards she was required to teach across all the content disciplines, especially in science and social studies. As she addressed these content standards, she had students write letters to their parents about what they were learning. When parents were not comfortable writing in English, Imamoto put to work instructional aides and other adults who lived in the community to help these parents write to their children.

Says Imamoto, “I wanted to put this letter-writing standard to work as a tool for learning, for making sense of important content, and for communicating that learning to others, particularly to parents who need to know what their children are learning.”

Commenting on Imamoto’s work, Jayne Marlink says, “Dawn took a standard that she could have counted on as ‘over’ and instead made it a thread in almost everything she created in the classroom for the entire year—threading her curriculum content; threading students, teacher, and parents; threading her teaching and her students’ learning. She didn’t have to do any of what she did to meet California’s standards, but she had to do everything she did to meet her own standards.”

**Effective teachers cluster standards; they do not attempt to teach them in isolation.**

Typically, teachers are presented with standards in the form of a checklist. Too often, this list then becomes a syllabus for implementing standards. Teach a standard, check it off. For many FOS teachers, this process did not sit well.

A fourth grade teacher from Washington State, Cec Carmack could have met the state’s “writing for career applications” standard for fourth grade by merely teaching the difference between a friendly letter and a business letter as the standards required. Instead, she opted to cluster this standard in relation to other standards—those requiring students to write in different forms and for a variety of audiences and purposes. Her students wrote to business owners requesting an opportunity to visit and interview the owner and staff. They wrote interview questions. They wrote interview notes. They wrote reports on what they had learned, and they imitated the kinds of writing they discovered were a part of the everyday work of the people they visited. Carmack and other FOS teachers learned that standards can be best taught when they are imbedded in units of study that are motivating and meaningful. As another FOS teacher, Holly Ciotti, puts it, “I realized that standards for writing must be nested in the curriculum. They cannot be tacked, stapled, or clipped to a lesson.”

Still, when state assessment time comes around, teachers get nervous about the checklist items. Says FOS participant Kati Carthum, “I’m concerned that the emphasis has shifted too quickly from working toward a goal to overcoming a barrier, that is, a shift from standards to testing. The rapid introduction of high-stakes testing that claims to be linked to the standards has caused many good teachers and schools to drop creative, innovative teaching techniques and focus primarily on test preparation.”

For most teachers, the movement toward effective instructional uses of standards is not a great leap but a series of small steps.

Most teachers believe they have high standards that guide them in their teaching. Says Marlink, “During our first FOS summer institute when we had teachers from Washington and California examine their states’ standards, it was not uncommon to hear ‘I do this already.’ There was little discussion of how they addressed the standards or about the variety of ways teachers could address the standards. There was also not substantive discussion of what it meant for students to meet the standards or of quality of work that met standards.”

However, when these teachers returned to the classroom, their focus changed. They now paid keen attention to the curriculum materials and units of study they were developing to address specific standards.

“But,” says Marlink, “the focus of the teachers’ study was still on their teaching. Their students’ writing was more a source of proof that their teaching addressed standards than it was a check on whether or not students were learning.”

By the second summer institute, however, many of the teachers had moved past this place. They were now, says Marlink, “making connections between standards, their teaching, and their students’ learning, and they were discovering effective teaching approaches to help struggling students meet these standards.”

In general, despite the complexity of issues revolving around the adoption of standards, most FOS teachers emerged from this three-year journey committed to the idea of standards. However, many of these same teachers were distressed by the way these standards were being implemented. Teachers reported that in many schools and school districts, standards were being adopted, but the professional development needed to carry them out was minimal or nil. They did not believe that the requirement that they post “the standard of the day” should pass for professional development. Teachers have received binders with standards and benchmarks; ready-to-use, standards-based lessons; and addresses for Internet sites where they could print out the standards-based materials. None of this helped them much in bringing standards-based learning to their classrooms in a way that helped their students.

Kati Carthum, on her first day of teaching at her middle school, was handed just such a binder containing the requisite materials, all created a significant distance from her classroom. She leaved though the binder and decided it was “shelfware.” That was before Carthum became involved with the Central Washington Writing Project (CWWP). At the writing project, she says, “I began to talk about questions of teaching writing and my concerns about my inability to teach my struggling students, as well my successes with specific approaches to teaching writing.” Carthum was invited to join CWWP’s FOS team. “In this supportive atmosphere,” she says, “I was able to study the standards and see what was expected of my students and me.”

Now, exploring the standards as part of a vital writing project community, Carthum saw a document that had seemed a mere list of dictums become a living instrument that could help her teach and help her students learn.

In summary, what conclusions can be pulled from the Focus on Standards work? Marlink says, “We really wanted to make the day-to-day life of teachers visible, to connect it to the progress of their students. We found that teachers need equal measures of a professional content/discipline knowledge, a knowledge of how to teach, and a deep knowledge of particular students. Too much professional development isolates these three. If any set of standards is to work, it must be premised on professional development that integrates rather than separates these elements.”