Helping Teachers Thrive

by Margrethe Ahlischwede

When I was a kid, I spent summers on the beach near my father's family's summer house in Tisvilde, a fishing village on the northern coast of Denmark. I had lots of playmates, cousins my age—all of us in our saggy swimsuits, blue-eyed and blonde—whose parents were among my father's older brothers and sisters. The black and white photos from those years show happy kids, a big stucco house with tile roof, a sundial in the yard, white benches along the rose beds, and down the path from the house, the beach and the ocean and the bathhouse where we changed our clothes.

Not until two years ago, when my older cousin Steffen came to visit us here in Tennessee, did I know that, even back then, I was bossy. Steffen said, "You always told everybody what to do," and I wouldn't have known that from the photos. But I do know that it is hard for me now, during the summer institutes, to refrain from telling teachers what to think and how to think. I speak fervently about allowing choices in writing. I want to know precisely what a teacher means when citing a text with which I am unfamiliar, particularly texts that are prepackaged "writing programs." I argue for a culture of teaching that affirms teachers so they will say, "I have an idea, and I think if I work with so and so, we can make something happen." And I argue against the culture of teaching that leads to obedience, to superb teachers saying, "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." Yet I wonder if, in my fervor, I am not myself insisting on a kind of obedience.

Like most project directors and university teachers, I have several "expert" roles: speaker at conferences, committee member, thinker. Facilitating a summer institute takes leadership, but a kind of leadership that assumes that all those around the table are experts. A key to summer institute success is the ability for the facilitators to remain still and listen. In the summers, I work to negotiate the tension between telling and listening. Because of my inclination to order people around, I must remind myself that the summer institute is not a time for me to take charge. Negotiating my talking and listening is work.

During the rest of the year it is even more difficult to negotiate the tension between facilitating action in a community of equals and getting things done. For instance, how do I word my appeal to our teachers when the National Writing Project asks for letters of support to members of Congress who hold NWP funding in their hands? Do I send out the email with the order, "Send your letters, and do it now!" I wouldn't want to hear that voice myself. So I send out the email as information in hopes that teacher-consultants will act upon it. Our West Tennessee Writing Project (WTWP)—sponsored workshops for teachers are excellent. But how do I generate participation? Do I email our TCs, "It is your responsibility—and your privilege—to attend WTWP-sponsored workshops, and, remember, bring a friend"? Probably not. Instead, I keep TCs and our various other audiences informed through emails, our newsletter, brochures, news releases through university relations, and listservs.

My cousin was right when he characterized my behavior as a kid. My inclination is, in fact, to order and control. But the culture of critique is alive and well in West Tennessee, and no teacher needs more ordering around from me.

I like how our project can provide summer institute participants with texts by "old pals" such as Atwell, Galkins, Zemelman and Daniels, Fletcher, Meier, Ray, Routman, Kutz, and Roskelly. I enjoy considering new books on teaching practice, placing the order with the bookstore manager, and distributing copies to our teachers. I enjoy even more what then happens during the institute—hearing the authors' names, theories, and practices become part of our community vocabulary. It is such fun to listen for this. And even more, I like how, in each summer institute, we teachers in our discourse community sit around the table talking about ways to thrive through reading, writing, and claiming the teaching strategies modeled around us.

I know that the writing project succeeds because its strategies are sound, participation is voluntary, and teachers who apply want to return to writing, to sharpen their tools, to earn hours for recertification, to satisfy a curiosity or a longing. Personally and professionally, the West Tennessee Writing Project has been a gift, offering me the opportunity to associate with some of the brightest and funniest women in Tennessee. (Approximately 90 percent of the teachers who participate in WTWP-sponsored programs are women.) From them I have learned about teaching, writing, and the culture of schools. I have been introduced to chocolate gravy, barbecue, and slaw. I have learned how much church is the core of family. And I have learned that while, as a Methodist, I am outside the Baptist fold, I do, as one of our teachers said to me one day in the office, "show promise." And that's the key, to resist the urge always to tell teachers, and instead, to grow my ability to listen for the promise in teachers.

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