Sowing Seeds for the Future
Outreach at the Maryland Writing Project

by Christina Dushel

Never give it away for free. While this is usually good advice, free samples at a grocery store or samples stuffed in a Sunday paper sometimes result in a sale. The Maryland Writing Project (MWP) recognized the power of giveaways and decided to offer free samples of their best product—teacher-consultant (TC) presentations.

During the 1999-2000 school year, the MWP undertook a year-long outreach effort. MWP staff mailed over 3,000 coupons to TCs and area supervisors and administrators, each redeemable for a free, one-hour TC presentation at a Maryland elementary or secondary school. At the same time, the MWP also began a series of free Saturday workshops through which they hosted two back-to-back TC workshops at Towson University one Saturday each month. During the last school year, Maryland TCs gave 65 after-school presentations that reached 1,400 teachers and held free Saturday workshops for 300 area teachers.

From the beginning, the MWP staff’s goal for this initiative was to introduce themselves to more teachers and to create new business, “We decided that we were not waiting for people to call us. We tried to reach them as much as possible,” said Barbara Bass, director of the MWP. “We never expected an immediate impact; we were sowing seeds for the future.”

A few of those seeds took root early. Based on the numbers, the effort was a success. From one mailing, the MWP received 100 responses from area schools, and out of those contacts, 65 after-school workshops were scheduled. Currently, the MWP has contracts for 10 inservice training programs, 6 of which resulted directly from free after-school presentations.

As well, many of the initial contacts have acted like slow-growing seeds. Nurtured in after-school workshops and on Saturdays at Towson University, these interactions build personal connections between the MWP and area teachers. They also feed empowerment, professionalism, and creativity—qualities that will bring teachers to future summer institutes. Angela Gugliotta is a TC from this past summer’s institute. She had not heard of the MWP before attending an after-school workshop at St. Ursula, the Baltimore parochial school where she teaches. “I became interested in attending the summer institute after seeing Barbara’s director Bass] enthusiasm. She was willing to talk to me about the program and about my own interest—teaching my students to write.”

Similarly, the free Saturday workshops have helped spread the word and share what writing projects do best. But they have also given the MWP’s newest TCs an opportunity to showcase their new presentations. During the last school year, the MWP hosted six monthly workshops held at Towson where teachers gathered for the customary donuts and coffee followed by some extraordinary professional development. Last year’s topics included writing in the content areas, the reading/writing connection, and revision. The free Saturday workshops are continuing this year with greater recognition from local school systems. Baltimore City Public School teachers, for example, can now receive professional development credit for attending the Saturday sessions.

These workshops provide a taste of the summer institute one Saturday each month. Virginia Anderson, a biology professor at Towson University, presented during the September session on writing in the content areas. She was happy to work with a group of motivated teachers, many of whom were introduced to the MWP for the first time. “I’m a science teacher, and it’s wonderful to see, again, how all teachers face the same problems with teaching writing in our classrooms,” Anderson says. “We can all take something from one another regardless of our disciplines. Of course, I learned new things. I never share at a writing project activity where I don’t get more than I give.”

Maryland Writing Project TCs keep sharing. They share their best practices with teachers throughout the state, and in turn, Maryland’s best teachers keep coming home to the Maryland Writing Project.

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Language Lessons
by Libbie Morley

Everyday at school
Mrs. Dodd wore her hair in a bun and her feet in old lady shoes.
Her Canadian accent whipped our Kentucky ears.
She had workbooks and the workbooks had blanks.
There was only one word to put in each blank and Mrs. Dodd knew it.
There were commas to add and Mrs. Dodd knew where.
We guessed.
We were afraid we would get it wrong.

On Sunday at church I listened to the rhythmic liturgy crafted years ago.
“We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life...”
I joined in myself with the grownups.
“give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful;”
I looked at the words in the prayer book.
“Be ye sure that the Lord he is God; it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves...”
I looked at the semicolon in the prayerbook and the comma.
Everyone read up to the comma and breathed. We all got it right
and Mrs. Dodd wasn’t even there.

Libbie Morley is a teacher-consultant with the Bluegrass Writing Project at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. She attended the summer 2000 NWP Writing Retreat in Santa Fe.