CSA Offers Teachers Powerful Tools

In a conference room at the Sacramento, California, Holiday Inn, five adults arrange themselves in a provocative tableau. One person points accusingly at another who is seated several feet away, her hands covering her face. The three others, seated between these two, look on disapprovingly. Another group stands nearby, observing this frozen scene, making suggestions to alter it.

"Holly, stop pointing. Now approach Marsha, kneel by her desk and act as if you are talking to her quietly. Marsha, take your hands from your face." The three other participants are told to turn around and attend to their own concerns. A hostile scene turns relatively mellow.

The actors in this enlightening exercise were teacher-consultants of the California Writing Project who, last July, participated in one of a series of NWP-sponsored workshops designed to involve TCs in the work and methods of the Centre for Social Action. A social service organization based at DeMontfort University in Leicestershire, England, CSA promotes a unique approach to working with those who use social services as they face issues such as homelessness, urban safety, drug abuse, health, and education. At the heart of CSA's thinking is the premise that the users of these services, rather than social service agencies, are best able to define and solve problems that affect them.

Encouraging Global Conversations

The Global Conversations conference in The Netherlands was designed so that teachers from every country could get together and talk. Here, conference cochairs Sherry Swain and Chris Anson enjoy the closing reception of a very successful conference. See page 12.

At four workshops hosted by the NWP last summer, CSA trainers Jennie Flemming and Ian Boulton led writing project teachers in Sacramento, Philadelphia, Berkeley, and Norman, Oklahoma, in activities that introduced them to powerful CSA principles. The experience mimed in the

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Sacramento scene, for instance, is one most of us who have been in a school recognize: A teacher reacts to a student’s mistake or misbehavior in a dramatic and hostile way. The teacher’s action becomes an emblem of the conflict-producing environment in which it is set. The student withdraws, perhaps placing her hands over her face, as Marsha did. She then becomes the center of attention, the focal point of other students’ disapproval.

Ian and Jennie asked the Sacramento group to identify the problem and its consequences in this scene. They stressed that it is the responsibility of the whole group, not just those involved in the tableau, to consider the effects of the behavior being depicted.

Group members focused on the lack of compassion, the blame, and the singling out of an individual in a way that produces pain, humiliation, and failure, feelings that go beyond the immediate context of this particular drama. Ian and Jennie then asked the group a key question: “How can this situation be changed?” As group members instructed Holly to stop pointing and approach Marsha’s desk, they realized how important it is to become aware of and change their own emblematic reactions, and saw how far such changes can go in reducing conflict in the classroom.

Of course, the process depicted here is an exercise, not in itself meant to generate permanent change. Ian and Jennie warn against “expecting an instant solution to existing problems.” But the exercise effectively demonstrates the CSA process. Participants are urged to examine the environment in which they live and work, collectively identify issues and concerns, explore why these problems exist, and propose and act on realistic strategies for changing these
circumstances. The use of writing as a tool for analysis and action planning is also stressed. Those involved in the CSA sessions had no trouble relocating CSA principles and methods in their schools and classrooms. Mike Pickering, a TC with California's Area 3 Writing Project, sees CSA techniques as a way of moving educators to act. "School life," he says, "seems to breed a culture of complaints. Teachers have a sense that things aren't as they should be, but we often think it is someone else's job to fix it. CSA teaches those directly involved to solve their own problems, achieve their own goals on their own terms, and look within their group for answers to challenges they are facing."

Maria Lourdes Gonzales, a TC with the San Diego Area Writing Project, has brought CSA techniques directly into her classroom. "One day, I started class with a simple question. I asked my students what they wanted to learn. This led to a discussion of some of the obstacles that got in the way of this learning. Why, for instance, were many of my students not reading at grade level? Over the next few weeks students developed an action plan; they listed things, behaviors, and people able to help them improve their reading. They wrote in their journals every day. They wrote letters to themselves about what they wanted to learn. All of this effort is directed toward the goal of empowering my students to take an active role in their achievement."

As these examples demonstrate, CSA's philosophy and methods come pretty close to the ways writing project teachers work with students and colleagues. "Social Action's methods are basic to good classroom practice," one Tulsa attendee wrote in her evaluation at the conclusion of the Oklahoma training sessions. But beyond reinforcement, participants at these training session found CSA's methods liberating. "It was so powerful," says Dawn Imamoto of the Area 3 Writing Project. "I left feeling I could attack any problem."

Those attending the NWP Annual Meeting in Milwaukee will have the opportunity to learn about the CSA experience first hand. Ian and Jennie will conduct an introductory session at the meeting on Friday, November 17. NWP will host more CSA training sessions in the future and, over the long term, will look for ways to combine the rich resources of the two organizations.

NWP Codirector Elyse Eidman-Aadahl believes that continuing cooperation between CSA and NWP will result in a comfortable fit. "In both cases, our organizations value practitioners. We both believe in the people on the ground. CSA has the tools and practices to bring people together to take collective action on challenges and issues they identify, from developing after-school programs to working with school districts. Their work helps provide a framework for our initiatives."

For more information about CSAs work or the Centre for Social Action Newsletter, visit CSAs Web site at www.dmu.ac.uk/~dmuca.

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