Talking Through Technology

NYCWP Builds Community Online

by Ed Osterman

It's always the first thing I do on the days I am at the writing project office. I turn on the computer, access my email, and then check the listserve. What ideas or issues are being raised there? Who needs help with a unit or book? What can I do, as listserve manager, to keep the conversations going? Some days I might spend up to an hour reading the comments, composing responses, or suggesting new topics. The time doesn't matter. Managing the New York City Writing Project's (NYCWP) listserve has become one of the most satisfying—and important—aspects of my work as associate director.

Getting Started

I first learned about listserfs at the National Writing Project (NWP) Annual Meeting in November 1997. Linette Moorman, one of our codirectors, and I joined a small group discussion about technology led by members of both the Oklahoma and Puget Sound Writing Projects. At that time, neither of us used computers for much more than word processing. In fact, I had just become acquainted with email and was using it to contact NWP members who were planning to attend the meeting of the Urban Sites Network in New York City. I was truly excited by the idea that members of our own site could be electronically connected within a closed network for purposes of professional dialogue. Encouraged by the discussion at the annual meeting that year, Linette and I decided to explore the possibilities of creating a listserve for our membership. Codirector Marcie Wolfe assured us that there would be support at Lehman College, our home base, for establishing a listserve and asked me to manage it.

As a twenty-two-year-old writing project site, one of our greatest challenges has been to determine how we can maintain and continue to build our citywide network in the face of a changing teacher population that must cope with increasing demands on their time. For years, five or six Saturday meetings were the main format for NYCWP teachers to gather together at Lehman College in the north Bronx to share practice, explore issues, and learn from guest presenters. We were young and eager and could always expect a turnout of thirty or forty members. This is no longer true.

Though we continue to hold these meetings, attendance is smaller because many of our members have other weekend commitments. Many of our teachers tutor students in Saturday morning programs, and many of our younger members are exhausted from a week of juggling heavy teaching loads with graduate school demands. We have attempted to develop and support small study, reading, and writing groups around the city, so that teachers can meet more easily in their home areas with other writing project teachers. Some of these small groups have taken off; most have floundered for a year and then dissolved.

In March 1999, we decided to put some trust in technology. We knew there was considerable email activity already going on among NYCWP

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The listserve has provided a place to continue the kinds of conversations that began in the summer invitational institutes and in our various inservice series. teachers; now we hoped to expand its use. Marcie consulted and worked with the technology specialists on the Lehman campus to get the listserve up and running. In the meantime, I wrote a letter to our membership that explained the idea of a listserve and invited people to participate by sending us their email addresses. The first announcement yielded thirty-five responses, some from teachers we hadn't heard from in quite a while. I looked at Marcie and said, "So, how do I get this started?"

She replied, "Well, there has been so much concern among our teachers about reading, why not ask, 'What's one concern you have about your students as readers and what have you done or used recently to address this concern? Please introduce yourself and identify your school before responding to the question.' I took her advice, and we were on our way.

Cultivating Conversations

The listserve has provided a place to continue the kinds of conversations that began in the summer invitational institutes and in our various inservice series. These conversations bring together many of our most experienced writing project teacher-consultants—people who have taught for twenty or more years—with first- and second-year teachers. Email discussions also provide an opportunity for people who have just had their first writing project experience to raise questions about the teaching of writing with their more seasoned colleagues, many of whom they have never actually met in person. For teachers with young children or second jobs, or for those who live a distance from Lehman College, the listserve provides a way to stay in touch with a large number of project members.

Over the past year and a half, members have used our listserve for a range of purposes. Here is just a sampling of some of its uses and the topics that have engaged us:

Requests for help: Often members will use the listserve as they are about to begin a new unit or book. Many teachers have requested help with identifying essays, poems, nonfiction, and writing activities that could be used to enrich the study of major works of literature (The Crucible, Fences, Nectar in a Sieve), while other people have simply asked, "Has anyone ever taught ________?" Usually, such requests result in a flurry of titles, suggested approaches, and occasional warnings.

Last fall, a project member of long standing asked for ideas to create a unit around the theme of transformation, a unit that was to begin with the reading of Their Eyes Were Watching God. She received multiple suggestions. Recently, an adjunct English instructor asked for help with a Shakespeare seminar she was about to offer college freshmen. She received dozens of suggestions about particular plays, activities, and texts from high school teachers. Several weeks later, she profusely thanked everyone on the listserve, sharing with us some of the texts and activities that worked best. Other teachers have invited writing project colleagues to attend portfolio exhibitions in their schools or made inquiries regarding people's experience with block scheduling or collaborative planning.

Often a request for help may open up a dialogue about an accepted practice or a long-held project belief. A veteran high school English teacher expressed his ongoing frustrations with vocabulary instruction, initiating a surprising string of responses in which many middle school colleagues shared the varied and interesting ways in which they handled word study. Several months ago, many of us discussed how our use of journals has grown and changed over the years. Recently, a young teacher inquired about the best way to use freewriting. A few of us mentioned that in this standards-driven environment freewriting had fallen into disfavor in some quarters. An ESL teacher,
members were reading while on vacation. Unexpectedly, this led to a rich discussion of Holocaust literature after I posted my response to *The Reader*. Of course, the sharing of literature goes on throughout the year. Three books about Africa that Kevin, a history teacher, described and recommended on the listserv motivated our colleague Gail to encourage ten teachers in her own school to join a reading group to read and discuss each of these books.

Finally, people have used the listserv to announce teaching vacancies in their own schools or to inquire about possible openings elsewhere. Initially, Marcie, Linette, and I felt uncomfortable about the listserv being used for such purposes, but the membership seems to like this service.

Managing the Dialogue

I have been working in uncharted territory and have had to define my role as listserv manager as conversations unfolded and unexpected situations and issues emerged. My most obvious responsibilities include maintaining the listserv membership by registering new participants, updating email addresses, and troubleshooting technical problems with the help and support of Lehman’s responsive computer specialists. Marcie and other NYCWP staff are far more technologically savvy than I, but, let me assure you, managing the listserv has not required sophisticated technical know-how.

I have discovered a host of other responsibilities along the way: *Maintaining the dialogue*: Listserv discussions don’t happen by magic. Someone has to assume responsibility for getting and keeping the conversation going by raising questions, suggesting topics, or relating experiences that will resonate with colleagues. I try to stay alert to the issues confronting teachers on both the local and national front. If teachers in the schools where I work are struggling with a situation, it’s likely that my writing project colleagues are, too. If something has or has not worked in a classroom and I am not sure why, it is probable that it might be of interest to others. I simply describe the situation, express my viewpoint, and ask for a response. Once the listserv is established, different conversations occur simultaneously, and many of the topics are initiated by members. That is what one hopes will happen.

In the spring of 2000, a heated discussion on merit pay (initiated by Christine, a former NYC teacher now living and working in California) occupied our members for a period of time. No issue, however, has galvanized our membership more than the impact that “high stakes” tests, being instituted at all levels of schooling, have had on instruction. The conversation began with an impassioned plea from Joe, a high school English teacher, desperate for help and information to prepare his students to take the rigorous new English Regents exam, which all high school students must pass in order to graduate. His request set off a four-month dialogue about testing that was alternately emotional, political, philosophical, and practical. Members shared information on classroom practices, argued in favor of and against such tests, and considered the possibilities of protest and resistance. More than any other topic, it was this issue that drew NYCWP teachers to the listserv and solidified its value to our membership.

Sharing interests: The conversations are not always exclusively professional or rooted solely in our lives as teachers. We alert one another to interesting Web sites and news articles. Often there is a trading of jokes that have popped up on the Internet, and this past spring several of us could not resist celebrating composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim in honor of his 70th birthday.

Last summer the topic of “summer reading” unleashed thoughts about the books project...
After a lengthy online discussion among many listserv members about where good teaching ideas originate, we agreed that it would be appropriate for participants to ask one another for permission to share particular instructional strategies and suggestions with others and that we identify the source for these ideas. This was of particular concern during the heated conversations about testing.

Assessing the Benefits

There have been multiple benefits to establishing a listserv for the NYCWP. It has provided an additional forum for project members to share and learn from one another; we exchange ideas for lessons and units, viewpoints on issues, and news about day-to-day occurrences in classrooms and schools. It has fostered and strengthened collegial relationships and friendships among project members who might never have encountered each other otherwise. It has given the NYCWP leadership a swift and immediate way to communicate information about meetings, seminars, and project activities. It has also provided our newsletter staff with a source for articles. In fact, we now regularly edit and reprint in each issue one conversation thread from the listserv that we think the entire membership would like to read.

Not every NYCWP member is a listserv participant. But our original list of thirty-five members has swelled to seventy-five, and we currently manage the most active listserv on the Lehman College campus. Clearly, technology has begun to revitalize and enrich our community. I cannot imagine a writing project site, particularly in states where teachers are separated by enormous geographical distances, that wouldn't benefit from a listserv. Find a manager and let the talk begin!

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