No Classroom, or Project, Is an Island

by Janet A. Swenson

Teacher research is not the answer to the problems that plague American schools. Sound heretical? In his foreword to Karin Dahl's *Teacher as Writer: Entering the Professional Conversation*, Thomas Newkirk suggests that "one limitation of teacher research is the way the world outside the classroom has often been bracketed out. It is as if the classroom is a separate island of learning, unaffected by the institutional setting" (Dahl, 1992, p. xiii).

Newkirk embraces teacher research as one face of a multifaceted approach to reforming education, but fears that teachers whose typical teaching situations isolate them from one another will be unable to discern and advocate for the much larger educational reforms that supercede those they can identify and address within their classrooms. They lack a "foil," an "other" against whom they can play out their developing understandings of generative composition pedagogies and theories.

Much talk at the NWP Directors Retreat held in June in Colorado Springs, Colorado, centered on creating such a "foil." We shared observations similar to Newkirk's as we worked to articulate for one another why our individual projects are willing to invest not only in offering high-quality invitational summer institutes, but in developing similarly high-quality school-year professional development initiatives.

Participants acknowledged that such school-year initiatives drain project reserves—particularly the time and energy of site leaders and TCs—but they uniformly agreed that the investment in these programs allows TCs, the project, and the broader community to reap great dividends. Not only does the school-year work serve some perfunctory project needs by generating greater discretionary funding and by serving as an excellent recruitment tool, it also supports the continued growth and development of individual TCs, sites, and student writers.

Chatting in informal groups, directors and codirectors noted that developing successful school-year programming creates challenges for sites: potential TC "burnout"; teacher exasperation with poor-quality, mandated inservices; director fatigue; and administrative "buy-in" to project-generated opportunities.

However, retreat participants found that in breaking their own isolation by discussing issues with leaders from other sites, they were able to discover a variety of promising strategies for addressing these concerns. For instance, school-year programs often create a heavy burden on TCs who regularly serve as workshop facilitators and presenters. During the discussion, methods of addressing this concern emerged. Why not create a larger cohort of TCs who are prepared to facilitate the workshops by offering advanced institutes designed to scaffold the development of workshop facilitators? Why not advertise district-requested inservice opportunities in project newsletters and encourage a broader circle of TCs to submit proposals for workshops addressing these requests?

Most attendees noted that though many teachers have grown cynical about attending mandated, school-sponsored inservices, optional NWP-developed workshops usually enjoy positive receptions because participants find them engaging and useful and find the presenters respectful and grounded in both theory and fieldwork. Nonetheless, directors noted that they are now often looking for means...
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to provide food, materials (particularly professional texts), and/or stipends to lure teachers into their first NWP-sponsored in-service experience. With increased federal funding for teacher professional development, many sites are finding such resources more plentiful and easier to locate.

Several directors noted that they were feeling fatigued, a bit overwhelmed by their projects' success and growth, and burdened by the increased number of in-service requests. Directors from more established sites urged them to create an in-service coordinator's position to free them to focus on other project initiatives. Some noted that such a position might be funded by a modest stipend from the federal grant supplemented by a percentage of the income from the workshops. They also noted that TCs can assume some of the responsibility for generating interest in contracting project services for their own schools and districts through conversations with returning TCs who have had success securing work for the project. Some participants noted that high-quality promotional materials often lead schools and districts to contact the project, freeing the director or in-service coordinator from making exploratory phone calls and visits.

Finally, participants shared methods they have developed for securing investments from administrators. These strategies ranged from offering complimentary workshops at administrative meetings to soliciting testimonials from teachers who attend workshops; from creating partnerships with other powerful organizations in the community to collaboratively developing grant proposals to fund school-year programs.

Retreat participants shared testimonials from teachers regarding their positive experiences in developing and facilitating workshops for their colleagues in the field. These anecdotes suggest that such TCs become more active teacher-researchers and more reflective practitioners. By taking their practice out of their classrooms, they question their own theories and methodologies, their own understandings of teaching and learning. Working beyond schools and their districts, they open up their thinking and their work to the critical responses of colleagues who work in different contexts and cultures. Such experiences offer opportunities for professional growth for the presenter, those in attendance, and the project.

Directors noted that TCs are willing to contribute to the development of site-sponsored school-year programming not only because they are curious about how others will respond to their work, but also because they believe that students whose teachers are more reflective and research oriented enjoy the benefit of improved instruction. For teachers at sites across the nation, improved student writing is the ultimate goal. They know that to reach this goal they must resist insularity by sharing their own practices and beliefs outside their individual classroom settings.

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