Mind the Gap

by Mary Ann Smith

Last week I boarded the shuttle from Los Angeles to San Francisco in first-class accommodations—a carrot from my airline for all the hours I have spent incarcerated in planes. The unexpected bonus, as it turned out, was my chance to glimpse the flight attendant reading from the “friendly skies” manual.

With her head tucked over the script, she said, “Good morning, welcome aboard United’s 747.” The fact that it was afternoon and we were flying on the smaller 737 did not deter her. She continued to read verbatim, giving us details about meals and programming that were not at all part of the regular shuttle service from one end of our state to the other. Once during her recitation a colleague tried to intervene, pointing out that this plane was not headed for Denver. But for whatever reason, the script prevailed over obvious conflicts in logic.

During my 55 minutes of luxury—a “free” drink and a one-ounce package of party mix—I did something that comes so readily to teachers. I went over and over what I had just heard as if I were personally responsible for this mindless reading.

Of course, I cannot account for why a flight attendant in her milieu at 37,000 feet could not interpret a simple manual. But I can wonder if policymakers who have recently taken over reading instruction are laying the foundation for a whole generation of such readers. In California, we have our own shuttle service between phonics (the basics) and whole language (the so-called fuzzy, liberal approach). Program funding often depends on the chunk of time devoted to phonics. Those who offer alternative programs or research risk being cast out of the fold of “acceptable” scholars.

What is the role of a writing project in the midst of this pedagogical version of the Montagues and Capulets? How can we respond without being unfairly labeled as enemies of one side or the other—especially when the “sides” are often artificial divisions that do not do justice to what goes on in successful classrooms? I am reminded of the warning, stenciled at regular intervals along the cement platform of the London underground, that advises passengers not to step inadvertently into the space between the platform and the train. “Mind the gap,” it says. How do writing projects mind the gap?

The writing project is at its best, I would argue, when we can turn the latest dogma into opportunity. We are most relevant when we do not try to defend certain practices, but rather, when we are willing, as Jim Gray used to say, to remain open, to explore all possibilities.

A case in point. The legislated reading curriculum in our state has led California Writing Project (CWP) teachers and directors to look more closely at the teaching of reading and the parallels with the teaching of writing. This year, we used the time at our statewide spring meeting to learn from Sheridan Blau, Christine Cziklo, and Cynthia Greenleaf—talking, questioning, and writing our way through difficult pieces of reading, in particular, pieces that secondary students might encounter. We put our own reading processes on the table—just as we have done with our writing processes over the years—to make explicit the ways in which good readers make sense of what they read. And we thought about our teaching strategies, about what we might add to the mix.

The theme of our meeting—a familiar writing project theme that cuts through any reform effort, but particularly one in which reading and spitting out sounds have become synonymous—quickly emerged. Teachers are key. Teachers are the ones who teach students to create drafts, both in writing and reading, and to revise their drafts for meaning and clarity along the way. Teachers are the ones who work on fluency, who prepare students for different genres, audiences, and purposes, who set up processes.

In times of turbulence, the writing project plays a crucial role: taking up the reform issue at hand and, in response, placing even more importance on teacher professionalism while offering teachers a means to expand rather than reduce their roles and their practices. It’s fair to say that, by avoiding right answers, the CWP has created a little turbulence of its own, free of right answers or slogans.

I always cringe when people, both outside and within our ranks, say the writing project was invented to promote one idea, for example, “the writing process.” On the contrary, the writing project, from the get-go, deliberately sidestepped any particular pedagogical path. Now in an era when so many teachers are faced with packages and scripts—when they could simply fax in their lesson plans—it is more crucial than ever that the writing project mind the gap between the “approved” approach, regardless of its origin, and the belief in teachers, in their capacity to make informed, beneficial decisions.

Our writing project role then? To provide the intellectual community teachers need to refine their practices, conduct their research, and discuss issues that affect their students. We may not change the airline industry, but we can change a reform strategy, however framed, and make it into our own occasion—an occasion for learning together how to continue to improve the lives of our students.

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