The Creation of the ELL (English Language Learners) Network

BY NORMA MOTA-ALTMAN

This summer, in the midst of Washington state’s pine forests, ten Writing Project Teacher consultants met to develop and shape the work of the National Writing Project’s newest network, the ELL (English Language Learners) Network. Meeting at the Sleeping Lady Conference Center in Wenatchee, Washington, these TCs made a commitment to serve as the leadership team for this latest endeavor of the NWP.

The TCs who met in Washington will make up the new network’s leadership team: Dorann Bickford (Oklahoma State WP); Dana Dusibier (Area 3 WP); Olga Freshon (Boston WP); Eva Guillot (National WP of Acadiana); Margaret Kania (Chicago WP); Zenaida Rosario (San Diego WP); Gretta Vollmer (Bay Area WP); Noreen Winkler (Central California WP); and Norma Mota-Altman (UCLA WP) who will serve as the network chair. Jo Fyfe from NWP also attended the meeting and provided a national perspective.

Over the course of two days, the team met, bonded and developed the mission statement and goals of the network. The ELL Network has as its mission the responsibility “to bring education, awareness and advocacy of English Language Learners’ issues to the forefront of the writing project’s work in the teaching of writing.”

The goals of the network are:

- to help teachers gain awareness of equity issues regarding race, class, gender, language, and culture
- to educate learning communities about second language acquisition and the teaching of writing
- to support and advocate for teachers of English Language Learners at all academic levels (K-University) in their efforts to improve learning and the teaching of writing
- to promote discourse and understanding of the social issues involved in the teaching of English Language Learners.

An action plan to begin this important work was also developed and each of the TCs went home with work to do. It was a stimulating and exciting time for all of the participants who have worked or are working with English language learners. They have experienced first-hand, the challenges of teaching writing to students whose first language is something other than English.

How did all this come about? A few years ago, the National Writing Project identified five strategic directions that would inform the work of the project over the next several years. These directions now guide the NWP and serve as a check in its work with other organizations. Among the strategic directions was a commitment to equity (especially for the growing number of English Language Learners in our schools), an issue which had become a major concern at sites across the NWP. During the last six months, Norma Mota-Altman has worked as a field director exploring ELL and equity issues among NWP sites.

The TCs who gathered at the Sleeping Lady Center left feeling empowered by the prospect of an ELL Network within the NWP and hopeful about what this new emphasis will do for ELL teachers and learners.

As one TC said “To have ELL issues raised at a national level with the NWP is wonderful!”

Another added: “I feel we might really be able to impact the teaching of writing and the success of our ELL learners in school!”

There was a general feeling that, in the words of one TC, “If we can help teachers understand the processes and challenges of learning a second-language, maybe they will finally be able to empathize with their ELL students and the difficulties they face as they are learning to write in English.”

These ELL leaders will be facilitating conversations around the issues of teaching writing in ELL classes, parent involvement, and equity discussions at NWP’s Annual Meeting in Denver this year. Please come and share your hopes, your concerns and your ideas regarding the NWP, ELL and equity issues.

The ELL Network is the next step in a process that we hope will involve sites in ongoing conversations regarding equity for all students, particularly in the teaching of writing. Writing project sites will have the opportunity to become part of the ELL network within the next few months. Look for upcoming information in the next NWP mailing.