Twenty-Five Years of Making a Difference

BY ART PETERSON

In a brief essay celebrating the 25th anniversary of the California Writing Project (CWP), Lois Brandt of the South Coast Writing Project points out that streaking was a major fad in 1974. Coincidentally, Brandt writes, 1974 was also the year “Twenty-five exemplary teachers of writing gathered at UC Berkeley in a summer institute led by James Gray.”

In retrospect, streaking appears a minor, if bizarre, blip on the radar screen of 20th century cultural events while the Berkeley meeting, as Brandt points out, “was the beginning of a powerful model in the teaching profession that spread to many other sites in California and eventually throughout the country. Twenty-five years later, the California Writing Project (with 15 sites), an affiliate of the National Writing Project (with 161 sites), is still going strong.”

It was this strength and longevity that members of the CWP came to celebrate May 23–24, at the Convention Center in Sacramento, California. In addition to the camaraderie that accompanies any writing project celebration, attendees at the conference heard a variety of speakers who gathered to proclaim the enduring “specialness” of an idea born a quarter century ago.

On Sunday, conference attendees heard from Mary Ann Smith, an original 1974 summer institute participant who is executive director of CWP and an NWP co-director. Writing project founder Jim Gray spoke about the early days of the project and how it has evolved over the years. Jayne Marlink, CWP co-director, finished Sunday’s general session by asking participants to write about what from their writing project experience has been “for keeps.”

Monday speakers included Sonia Hernandez, a Deputy Superintendent with the Department of Education, Bob Polkinghorn, Executive Director of School–University Partnerships, University of California, and Gary Hart, Secretary for Education in the California Governor’s office.

In his keynote address, “What Hath Jim Gray Wrought?” Sheridan Blau, Director of the South Coast (CA) Writing Project brought listeners full circle, reminding them of the vision that had its birth in those heady days of 1974 and what that vision means today (the full text of Blau’s address appears in the summer, 1999 issue of The Quarterly of the National Writing Project).

“For Jim Gray and those of us who remain faithful to the writing project model, the writing project remains aggressively agnostic with respect to any approach that may be offered for school reform or instructional improvement, and yet militantly orthodox in its faith, first in the capacity of teachers to continue learning from their own experience and from the wisdom of peers and, then, in the ultimate authority of teachers to determine for themselves what works and doesn’t work in their own classrooms.”

Motivated by these and other inspiring speakers, conferees dispersed to attend a collection of breakout workshop sessions with topics as varied and tantalizing as “Sharing the Pen: Interactive Writing with Young Children” and “Student-Generated Rubrics: A Process for Co-Creating Assessments with Students.” As has been the case for 25 years, these session were characterized, not by “top-down” lecturing, but by competent, creative teachers writing and sharing their ideas and concerns.

As Mary Ann Smith has written, it is the belief in teachers that has defined the effectiveness of the National Writing Project and the California Writing Project:

“If we do not put our faith and our energy into teachers, then nothing we do in education—no initiative, no standard, no assessment—will ever make a real difference to the lives of students. To put this more positively, teachers are our best resource and out best hope to rethink and reshape education for the next century.”