Growing the Boston Writing Project:
The Lessons of 20 Years

by Joseph Check
In July, 1999, the Boston Writing Project (BWP) will hold its twentieth annual invitational Summer Institute. Recently BWP’s founding director, Joseph Check, and four members of the current Steering Committee gathered for a three-hour writing-and-response session. Excerpts from this writing session appear in the box at right.

A little over twenty years ago Ann Berthoff, the resident composition theorist on our campus, learned of something called the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). I was a new Ph.D. in English with experience teaching high school students, so I got elected by the powers-that-be to fly to an NCTE convention in Kansas City to check BAWP out. That July, after furious fund-raising and submission of a proposal to Berkeley, we held our first Summer Institute, and I began to share the NWP vision for improving writing in the schools. This seems a good moment to reflect on what has changed for us in twenty years, and what we have accomplished.

This morning I woke to the news that our newly reelected governor was urging rigorous testing for everyone currently teaching in a public school in Massachusetts, regardless of their education or years of experience. The governor’s plan would give teachers two chances to take a paper and pencil test in their
content area. If they failed the first time, they would be suspended. If they failed a second time, they would lose their certification and be fired.

Later at the subway station I ran into my friend Lou, a lawyer who knows I am in education. He was incensed. “What’s going on?” he screamed across the platform. “Why are they trying to screw you guys? Even criminals get three strikes – the felons are doing better than the teachers!”

What do you say to a line like that? Sitting on the train, I thought back to the beginnings of the Boston Writing Project, in 1979. I thought of first meeting pioneers of the Bay Area Writing Project like Jim Gray, Mary Kay Healy, Miles Myers, and Keith Caldwell, and what they taught me about teachers teaching teachers, the importance of teachers as writers, and the power that practitioners tap into when they learn from their own practice.

I thought about stability and change, about the staying power of the ideas on which writing projects are based. I thought about what falls away and what endures in a profession that is continually being challenged from the outside as not smart enough, not hard-working enough, and just plain not good enough. Why has the Boston Writing Project endured and grown as part of a National Writing Project that has also endured and grown, when so much else has fallen away, just as so much that is happening now will fall away? After twenty years as a project director, my list of Writing Project Lessons to keep in mind in today’s political climate is a short one:

1) Teaching produces knowledge.

Writing projects that succeed treat teachers with respect, and one basis of this respect is the belief that excellent teachers know something by virtue of being teachers, that other people don’t know, and that this knowledge can be shared and built on. In education we have talked for years about the need to join research and practice, but much of our thinking divides educators into knowers, usually university professors and researchers, and doers or practitioners, the people whose job it is to implement what the knowers have figured out. Much professional development is devoted to translating the ideas of the knowers into terms the doers can understand and use. This is called bridging theory and practice.

Writing Projects are different because they treat the doers as knowers too, and ask the doers to spread what they know through inservice and to build on it through writing, publication, and teacher research. Writing projects also open new roles for university faculty, because they liberate faculty who love teaching to be doers too—that is, to explore and expand their teaching, not just their research, in a community of doer/knowers unlike either the university or the schools.

Denise Patmon, director of the Masters of Education/Teacher Preparation Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston

I now work on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where it would be easy to fall into the “ivory tower” syndrome, but as I have internalized the principles and practices of BWP, I remain planted in classrooms. Summer institute involvement, school year follow-up, classroom consultations, conference participation and the like keep me connected with reality. I’m proud to be a card-carrying BWP member!

Millie Veal, co-director of BWP’s summer invitational institute and 30-year veteran teacher

The legacy handed down by Jim Gray, the notion of “teachers teaching teachers,” has left its imprint on every Boston Writing Project TC. When our state department of education finally recognized that reading, writing, listening and speaking were connected, we writing project Fellows were at the forefront of helping Boston schools put together a meaningful professional development plan. We designed programs to help teachers begin the immense task of making the paradigm shift from skill-based to strategy-based teaching, not only in writing but across all content areas.

In a system replete with top-down mandates, the Boston Writing Project has been able to tap into folks who have ordinarily just gone along to get along, but have instead gone on to make a difference!

Bruce Rettmann, high school English teacher

Teachers develop and teaching changes when we join a community with a common purpose like BWP We talk to each other, point out possibilities, tell about opportunities—we teach one another.

Karen Samuelson, high school ESL teacher

I see many colleagues in my department using response journals, portfolios, and writing rubrics. For many of them, these changes have come as a result of the WP institutes.
2) Everyone needs community. Like other successful writing projects, BWP is not just a course, or an institute, or even a staff development program. It's a long-term professional community in which members find a home. NWP's Elyse Eidman-Aadahl uses the term "third space" to refer to this combined physical, professional, and emotional dimension of writing project communities—not the primary space of home and family, nor the job space of teaching and schools, but a "third space" that combines important elements of both, offering a professional family to anyone who cares to join. I think of our project's "third space" as a Victorian house with many rooms, where many different conversations take place. Some rooms host writing groups or a literary anthology, others are about writing in the content areas, teaching writing to second language learners, teaching and writing poetry, or teacher research. New rooms are being added all the time, as new teachers enter the project or experienced members acquire new interests.

3) Change nurtures growth. The ability to accommodate new members and adapt to new conditions in both the schools and the host university is an essential element in keeping writing projects vital over time. Our first, 1979 summer institute had 17 Fellows, all from the Boston Public Schools. It was as much as we could do just to get from one day to the next, and on the final day Fellows and instructors were transformed and exhausted. In summer 1998 we ran institutes for over 100 teachers from more than twenty school systems, plus a student writer's workshop for 60 Boston high school students. It often seemed as much as we could do just to get from one day to the next, and on the final day Fellows, students, and instructors were still transformed and exhausted.

The topic areas of last summer's institutes reflect new types of expertise our project has developed over the past few years: writing in the content areas, building literacy for second language learners, supporting the state's English/Language Arts curriculum frameworks, building dual language literacy with Spanish bilingual students, teaching poetry K-12, and development of writing curricula. Other changes have included helping colleagues at UMass Amherst to develop the Western Massachusetts Writing Project, which in turn helped both sites achieve state funding, which in turn has allowed me to enter a new stage as Project Director. I am now much in the background at my site, as a large and active group of teacher-leaders plans and conducts the site's activities, supported by adequate funding and a strong university base.