Mississippi Teachers are Big on WONDER

by Sherry Seale Swain

John Dorroh, whose story follows below, was already a powerful writer when he came to our project as a participant in a writing across the curriculum open institute in 1989. There he met visiting BAWP TC Bob Tierney and began his career as a student-centered biology teacher. John returned for the 1990 summer institute, writing humorous personal narratives and creating writing-based instructional innovations for the young scientists in his classes. He was one of our pioneers in portfolio research, launching a “smorgasbord” of student assessment choices which included drama, cartooning, group work, journal entries, and arts—as well as traditional tests for the few students requesting them. In their portfolios, his students refer to themselves as scientists and reflect on how their understanding of science grows along with their understanding of themselves as learners. Although John was a popular presenter in inservice series focusing on writing across the curriculum, he had so much more to offer his fellow science teachers than could be shared in one or two presentations. Having expanded The WONDER of Learning to include retreat programs for elementary and middle grade teachers, I was overjoyed when John suggested a WONDER of Science program for our family of retreat offerings.

A typical WONDER group includes teachers or teams of teachers from five or six school districts. The group meets for four-and-a-half days in the summer and four overnight retreat sessions during the school year. Districts usually pay the program costs and travel; teachers give their personal time to attend the summer and weekend sessions. The MSU project provides some matching funds, clerical support, and assistance with materials. Continuing education units are offered.

The WONDER of Science is the Mississippi State University Writing/Thinking Project’s response to teachers throughout the state who want to implement writing/thinking approaches in their science classrooms. WONDER (Writing Opens New Dimensions of Educational Realms) was first used in 1987 to describe a summer program our project, in collaboration with other Mississippi sites, designed and conducted for teachers of at-risk high school youth. Teachers in that highly successful program encouraged us to broaden the scope of WONDER to include younger students and students of all subject areas for they had experienced first-hand the transformations that took place within themselves and their students as they began to embrace wonder, described by Sam Keen as “... revelatory occurrences which appear, as if by chance, bearing some new meaning... They are filled with mystery, presence, surprise, puzzlement, ambivalence, admiration” (Keen, 1973).

Sandra Price, founding director of our site, extended Keen’s definition of wonder events to encompass meaning for classrooms, students, and teachers. WONDER means:

- seeing each other as valuable people;
- discovering, seeing integrations, realizing our own capabilities;
- experiencing learning as full of awe, filled with stimulating, unanswerable questions;
- learning to love the unanswerable question more than the correct answer;
- working and trusting and learning and teaching in an environment of openness and community. (Price [Burkett], 1992)