NWP Programs Boost Nation's Young Writers

by Art Peterson

The core idea behind the National Writing Project can be simplified to a kind of mantra: "teachers teach teachers who in turn teach other teachers." The formula has worked. The NWP model is respected and emulated. But those who know the National Writing Project only by slogans such as this may wonder to what extent project sites reach beyond teachers and cut directly to the educational marrow, the kids we serve.

Of course, by helping hundreds of thousands of writing teachers to improve their skills, the NWP has had a profound effect on the nation's classrooms, but many NWP sites also have programs that reach students directly.

A 1996 informal NWP survey counted 53 sites with "youth oriented" programs. Of all the activities aimed at kids, the most popular has been the young writers programs that take place at dozens of universities and colleges throughout the country.

To find out more about these programs, we talked with four directors of well-established young writers sessions: Carol Booth Olson of the University of California Irvine Writing Project, Maureen Maginn of the Greater Kansas City Writing Project, Katherine Hailey of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, and Bob Weiss, the recently retired director of the Pennsylvania Writing Project and Pennsylvania State Writing Project Network.

Like writing project sites, young writers programs share some key elements. They are held during the summer, usually for half a day over a two- or three-week period on the college campus where the site is located. Many of these programs use elements of the writing project summer invitational institute as a loose model. The intent of young writers programs is to attract students who enjoy writing and give them a chance to learn from each other and from the teacher consultants who staff the programs. The young writers compose in a variety of genres, share their writing, respond to the writing of their classmates, and publish or display a work they wish to get out into the world. A visit/workshop with a working writer also is part of most programs.

Within this format variations blossom. Each of these programs started small, with 50 writers or fewer. Some have now become very large. At UC Irvine, Carol Booth Olson's program has grown to 1,000 students, pre-K through high school, all of whom meet at the campus student center. "With these numbers, my duties are a lot like those of a school principal," Olson says. The Pennsylvania program has also grown exponentially from its 1984 beginnings. At last count, Pennsylvania offered 14 programs to 1,400 students. As the program has expanded, some of these sessions have necessarily moved off campus to local schools. Says Bob Weiss, "We had a space problem, and the use of these alternative sites allows us to provide programs closer to home."

While some programs grow, size is not the only...
measure of success. Kansas City has had a young writers program for 16 years, one that began with 12 students and has grown modestly to 51 students, a number that program coordinator Maureen Maginn thinks is about right for now.

No two young writers programs are going to look the same. Visit the pre-K class at Irvine and you'll walk into a world of bean bag chairs, music and lots of colorful art work. In Northern Virginia, by contrast, the young writers are all 10 years old or older. Show up at this site on the first Thursday evening of the program and you'll find the 11th and 12th grade students participating in an overnight on the George Mason campus. "It's a bonding experience," says Kathy Hailey. "We used to hold the overnight at an Outward Bound site, but the kids decided they wanted to be on the campus. For high school kids, there's something cool about staying overnight in a university dorm."

How do students and parents find out about the young writers programs? Many ways. Pennsylvania casts a wide net. The site prints 120,000 brochures and mails to over 100 school districts. Weiss describes further features of this media blitz: "We take an ad in the summer camp insert of the Philadelphia Inquirer as well as local newspapers, parent magazines and district publications."

The greater Kansas City Project also advertises in a major newspaper, The Kansas City Star, but depends, as do all the sites, on word of mouth. "Many students return each year and encourage their friends to come along," says Maureen Maginn. "We offer an environment where kids can be themselves. In many schools it's embarrassing to love writing. Here they can share their guilty secret."

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His tired old eyes were half closed, and one hand lay curled on his knee.

I closed my eyes and...
Teacher consultants, of course, form a valuable network that can be put to work proselytizing for young writers camps. However, teachers not familiar with the writing project may be less dependable recruiters. “Kids who don’t like school writing are not considered by many teachers as likely applicants for our program” says Maginn. “Instead teachers will give our pamphlet to their star student who may not necessarily be the best candidate.”

Directors are also wary of parents who want their youngster to attend a young writers program when the child may have other plans for his summer vacation. Kathy Hailey says, “We used to ask for a sample of student writing. Now we give a prompt and also ask the child to explain why he or she wants to attend our program. If a parent is filling out the form, he has trouble answering that question with anything that sounds like the truth.”

The Northern Virginia program does turn applicants down, though, says Hailey, “more out of a sense that they don’t want to be there than because of any academic deficiency.” The Pennsylvania program, on the other hand, takes all comers as long as space is available. “But we do let parents know that we are not equipped by ourselves to handle special students—a blind child for instance,” says Weiss. “There’s no way we can get a kid to the bathroom, but if a parent wants to provide the assistance, we’ll take the child.”

For the most part, the young writers programs are financially self-sustaining. A ballpark tuition figure would be around $200 for the experience. Scholarships are a feature of some programs. Kansas City, for instance, grants full tuition scholarships based on need to two of the 50 students in its program. The Irvine site has tried scholarships but has soured on the idea. “You get into this ‘my child is needier than your child’ thing,” says Olson. Instead Irvine now has a special program with the
Santa Ana School District (98 percent minority students) to allow the district to send 30 students to the program with full tuition paid by the project.

Diversity in young writers programs remains a challenge. Maginn reports that the racial diversity in her program is “not good. We get many kids from the suburbs” she says. But the Greater Kansas City Project has been working to forge links to city schools and young writers are now doing readings at some of these schools, hoping to generate interest in the program.

Young writers programs are staffed almost exclusively by writing project teacher consultants. “Of course, we need talented, flexible people,” says Hailey. “When we don’t know someone, we’ll check with the people who run the summer institute. Our staff serving 90 to 100 students runs to about 12. We try to hire some new people each year, but we want also to hold on to some veterans to maintain the continuity.”

TCs are paid from $600 to $1,000, depending on the length of the program—three week programs pay more—and the number of hours per day the TC is expected to be present. The Virginia program pays TCs $1,000, but they are on campus from 9 to 3, meeting each day after the young writers go home.

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Weiss says it's not easy to staff a large program such as his. "We need high quality people and these are the folks who get alternative offers. With fourteen sites we may plan to offer as many as 100 classes, but some of them may not materialize. Many talented teachers don't want to be waiting around with no more commitment than a 'maybe.'"

On the other hand, teaching in a young writers program offers unique opportunities. "We have one teacher," says Weiss, "who spends the school year as an English department head in a Catholic high school. Here she works with lower grade kids and loves it."

The structure of each of the programs varies. Some, for instance, have whole-group sessions for a part of each day; others remain almost exclusively in smaller groups of between ten and twenty students. None of the writers programs has anything like a lock-step curriculum. Teachers and students are free to generate writing activities appropriate to their interests. Project directors do collect and file or publish writing activities and prompts from instructors so teachers can learn from each other and so TCS new to young writers programs will have some idea of what has worked for others. Weiss has sold his teachers' compilation of teaching ideas for $20.

Visit classrooms at any one of the sites and you're likely to find an exciting mix of activities, partially influenced by the age of the young writers. Enter the pre-school class at Irvine, for instance, and you'll be surprised at the skill range. But, says Olson, "We pretend they are all readers and writers. The scribblers start by making letters, while others move on to writing words or sentences or keeping journals." In a fourth grade class and you might see a young writer writing about his "trip" into one of the paintings he's found in the classroom. Or at the high school level a student may be collecting descriptive words from a page of Of Mice and Men and fashioning them into a poem.

Other sites make much of cross-age activities. At Northern Virginia, for instance, students may
break out of their small age-based groups and join a poetry workshop that finds 5th and 12th graders writing and sharing. Some of these cross-age interest groups are, in fact, initiated by students.

Though structures and strategies may differ from one site to another, there is general agreement on one key point: young writers programs are meant for enrichment, not remediation. “With two or three weeks during the summer,” says Olson “we can not hope to catch students up on all they may have missed out on over many years of school.” At the same time, however, she insists that teachers pay attention to and comment on students’ sentences. “Parents expect it,” she says.

As with the summer institutes, publication is part of the process. In Pennsylvania, with its many sections of fourteen students, each section leader is responsible for producing a collection and sending the anthology of student writing to the participants. The Pennsylvania Writing Project then publishes a regional anthology of the “best” of these local anthologies which (you guessed it) they sell. Irvine, however, with 1,000 students under one roof finds a single publication would be inordinately expensive. While individual teachers are encouraged to produce anthologies, the program now relies on a Barnes and Noble “Gallery Walk” during which students who wish to display work at the book store are encouraged to do so. The Irvine Project is now in the process of establishing a web site. “We will then be able to get every student’s writing out into the world,” Olson says.

Are the NWP young writers programs succeeding? If success can be measured by growth in numbers and the enthusiasm of the participants, both teachers and students, the programs are wildly successful. Bob Weiss gives us a hint as to why this is the case when he paraphrases Phillip Sydney: “The chief aim of poetry,” said Sydney “should be to move and delight.” The chief aim of a young writer’s program, says Weiss, “must also be to move and delight.” There are qualities young writers find in these programs that they do not always find elsewhere in their education. As one student put it, “The coolest thing about young writers is that it’s nothing like school.”
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He sat in his weatherbeaten old chair, a weatherbeaten old man with grizzled hair and gnarled limbs, scratches on his face like a cat had fought him hard for every one of its lives.

His tired old eyes with their faded twinkle were half closed, and one hand lay curled on his knee.

I closed my eyes and felt his tired old voice washing over me like a wave too far from the sea.

I looked at my grandfather, then I climbed into his lap put my arms around him, pulling him close, felt his warmth come flooding back.

Sarah Gilbert, 8th Grade Student Northern Virginia Writing Project
Magic Dress

I feel beautiful today,
maybe it's the dress.
Today I can touch the sun
without melting away
I can make the stars twinkle
and faces appear in the trees.
Today I won't fade into
the wall.
I'm not afraid
of what I have to say.
Your looks won't ignite
my pain.
Your lack of attention
doesn't bother me
today.

Maybe it's the dress,
but I feel beautiful today.

Beth Logan, High School Student
Greater Kansas City Writing Project