Western Massachusetts WP Finds 'Real' Audiences for Student Writing

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Over the past four years, the Western Massachusetts Writing Project (WMWP) has developed a number of programs based on the assumption that students will benefit from writing for audiences that are real: that is, audiences beyond self, teacher, and classmates. We believe, with the late James Moffett, that students should write for a range of audiences, some close to home and some distant, some known and some unknown. Because we have seen the energy and skill our students bring to this 'for real' writing, we believe that writing for audiences outside the classroom creates a range of new purposes to our students’ writing.

WMWP Student Publication Program

WMWP has created a place for students to get their work published, the WMWP Student Publication Program. This program began modestly in 1995, when Mary-Ann Devita Palmieri, a teacher-consultant from our first summer institute, volunteered to edit a literary magazine for students in our area. The first year, contributions came in from only a handful of schools, but the high literary quality and student pride generated by the anthology made for a huge success.

Thanks to a grant from the state Department of Education, we have been able to expand the Student Publication Program to five anthologies, one for high school students and two each for middle school and elementary school students. Last year over 800 manuscripts were submitted, from schools in all parts of the project area, and this year we expect even more. The program culminates each spring in a Publication Celebration at the University of Massachusetts. Last June’s was attended by over 600 students, teachers, parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends. Authors read their pieces and took home copies of the anthologies. WMWP supplied sets of these anthologies to participating schools for use in libraries and classrooms.

From the beginning, the Student Publication Program has involved students as editors as well as writers. Each year, when the call for manuscripts goes out, a call for student editors (grades 3 and up) goes with it. The response has grown from a dozen the first year to over 100 last year. A few weeks after the submission deadline, the student editors meet with their adult counterparts on a Saturday at the university to review and rate all of the manuscripts, to offer advice on publication format, and to consume an enormous amount of pizza. Some design covers and create illustrations. All take this work very seriously, and they do it well.

The publication program requires a significant effort by many people, but it also provides opportunities for teachers to serve as leaders and promoters of student writing. The teacher who edited the first student publication has become the program coordinator (receiver of manuscripts, organizer of editing day and celebration, convener of meetings). Fourteen other teachers, most of them summer institute alums and teacher consultants, have served as co-editors of the student publications. These co-editors conduct the student editing workshops, assemble the anthologies, and produce the camera-ready copy. Many other teachers serve as school contact people for the program. It is the teachers (not principals or superintendents) to whom we send announcements for distribution, and from them we receive manuscripts, names of student editors, and publication celebration reservations. Many school contact people do even more. They organize local recognition of the student authors and editors, including assemblies, letters from principals, and press coverage. They place copies of the student anthologies in school libraries, classrooms, and doctors’ offices. Some even start their own student publications.

And that’s the idea. As much as we enjoy the process of publishing student writing and working with student writers, our aim is not to become the publisher of student writing in the western half of Massachusetts. We couldn’t do this even if we
wanted to — we already receive many more manuscripts than we can publish, and we know we won't encourage student writing by rejecting most of it. Rather, we see our program as a vehicle for appreciating students who are writing, as a stimulus for those students and others to write more and write better, and as a model of student publication to be replicated on a smaller scale in individual schools and communities. To aid this process, we are offering for the first time this winter a workshop for parents and teachers on how to develop and sustain low-cost school-based publication programs. We also hope that our program will inspire teachers to come up with classroom publication projects and will even prompt students to start their own neighborhood magazines.

**Writing for Publication: A Model for Inservice Training of Writing Teachers**

Very much related to the Student Publication Program has been a three-year inservice staff development program, called Writing for Publication, that WMWP and the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) have developed together. Teachers who enroll in the program are expected to develop a "Writing For Publication" project in their class. The project must be collaborative — that is, it must have an audience outside the classroom — and it must make some use of technology in the process of researching, writing and publication. Teachers are given access to the WMWP 'fleet' of Alpha SmartBoards: small, inexpensive word processors that schools can afford to buy in sufficient numbers to make a difference. More important, teachers in the program meet in an after-school seminar that supports the work they are doing. Some seminar sessions are devoted to planning, some to reflecting on the classroom projects as they go, and some to considering the technologies (hardware and software) available to the teachers and students.

The program wraps up with a Publication Celebration, an event which provides a deadline similar to the timelines that are part of writing and publishing in the 'real' world. The Publication Celebration brings the students' and teachers' work to a public that includes teachers and students from other schools, administrators, legislators, and community members.

WMWP and SPS built this program on the NWP assumption that teachers are the best teachers of other teachers. Leaders are all WMWP-trained TCs. We also believe that effective professional development is more than a one-shot deal — that teachers need ongoing support in changing their practice. For this reason, the Writing for Publication program is ten weeks long and includes bi-weekly seminars led by WMWP TCs. These sessions allow teachers to report on their progress, to learn from and support one another, and to share
The event was the viewing of the individual classroom publication projects, each of which was set up on a table-display, staffed by the teacher and the students who had completed the project.

Examples of these projects include the Branton News Flash, Branton Elementary School's first newspaper, written by a fifth-grade class; a series of "People of Eminence" brochures; "The ABC's of Middle School," written by sixth graders at Kiley Middle School for fifth-graders who would be coming to Kiley in the next year; a book of children's stories written, illustrated, bound and distributed to patients at Baystate Children's Medical Center; a multimedia yearbook on CD-ROM; a series of pamphlets defining sexual harassment and suggesting codes of conduct; a collection of Native American legends; a flip book on the Greek Gods (copies of which were purchased another teacher for her class); and pamphlets introducing Shakespearean plays to peers.

What we have not yet said, and must now say: the Writing for Real programs we have described above cost money. They are not, however, tremendously expensive. Indeed, they can't be, for like other NWP sites we are low-budget. Our student publications are therefore adequate, but not glossy—photocopied and stapled along the left margin. We pay our teacher-editors. Not, regrettably, what they are worth, but a stipend that has more than symbolic value. As we fund these programs, however, we see this funding as seed money, not as perpetual support—hoping to watch them grow and become self-supporting. Schools in our area are now funding the program and have undertaken their own writing-for-publication projects.

A program that eventuates in student publication is something that attracts sponsors, as a small grant can produce a tangible product that can be held in the hand, evidence of work that teachers and students have together accomplished, a book or pamphlet on which the sponsors' names can be displayed!

The many programs that we have subsumed under the heading Writing for Real are, we now see, an extrapolation and extension of our practice in our invitational summer institute, where we not only publish participants' work at the end of the institute, but we bring in copies of publications like Writer's Market and try to help teachers think of themselves as publishing writers. The possibility of publication gives a point, an edge, to such practices that are central to NWP: responding to writing, revising, and editing. Perhaps as important, the Writing for Real programs move us all—teachers and students—out of our classrooms and, as engaged writers, into our communities.