For twenty-five years the National Writing Project has been bringing teachers together in communities nationwide to talk, write, and talk about writing. Last summer, these local conversations broadened to include a national on-line discussion when writing project teachers from seventeen sites tried an experiment called the E-journal — a kind of national conversation located on the World Wide Web in which participants could write about their summer institutes, debate issues in writing education, and even post some of their writing.

The E-journal was the brainchild of Shirley Brown, a teacher consultant with the Philadelphia Writing Project. As Brown listened to Fellows sharing journal entries at the Philadelphia Writing Project summer institute, she wondered if email and the World Wide Web could be used to connect Fellows at summer institutes nationwide.

So after talking with Shirley and other NWP techies (nicknamed "NetHeads"), we decided to try to make her idea of an on-line cross-site discussion of the summer institute experience a reality. We searched for sites that would be interested in participating in such conversations and would have the computer resources to do so. Within a matter of days, almost twenty sites had expressed interest.

Recruiting the E-team, a group of editors/publishers for the E-journal, was a matter of days. Inviting the rest of the NWP to participate was a different story...
went even more quickly. Just 24 hours after the announcement was sent to the NetHeads mailing list, the editing team was together. They were Dolores Johnson, Director of the Marshall University Writing Project; Debbie Manion, Alaska State Writing Consortium; Gordon Coonfield, Central Washington Writing Project TC; and Shirley Brown, Philadelphia Writing Project TC. Their responsibilities were to assist in monitoring and facilitating conversation on the website, to identify emerging themes, and to evaluate the project.

School had just ended when the first summer institute started — time to pull up those sleeves and get to work. A few emails started trickling in, mostly “hellos” from E-journal coordinators who had subscribed to the E-journal mailing list. At some sites the Fellows themselves were able to get email address and/or access to the Internet and send greetings to the list.

By the second week the exchange began, slowly at first. “Like snowflakes,” observed E-team member Gordon Coonfield from the Central Washington Writing Project (http://
There is nothing like the promise that drifts into the soul with the first flakes that fall. The freshness, the clean skein of white silk that begins as gossamer and becomes a pure woolen blanket just does something for me. I don’t know if it is a catharsis, me wishing myself clean, or a propitiation for a year’s subtle sins, or maybe that kind of forgiveness one automatically receives when picking up and moving to a new place. I don’t know, but I am counting on it being universal—or at least general.

This is how I feel watching these beautiful journal entries drifting through the cyber sky, settling over everything. I wish I could stop and respond to each carefully, spend some hours trying to put the impression into words. I don’t doubt their uniqueness, only my ability to quantify it into words, here. And in view of the fact of time, I thought I would celebrate them en mass, just as I do a first snow.

Keep it coming!

As new sites began their institutes, they would sign onto the list. Our first real conversation was on the topic of “books vs. cyberspace,” which was prompted by a spoof of high-tech hype that is making its way through cyberspace:

**Announcing the new Built-in Orderly Organized Knowledge device, otherwise known as the BOOK. It’s a revolutionary breakthrough in technology: no wires, no electric circuits, no batteries, nothing to be connected or switched on. It’s so easy to use even a child can operate it. Just lift its cover. Compact and portable, it can be used anywhere — even sitting in an armchair by the fire — yet it is powerful enough to hold as much information as a CD-ROM disk ...**

**Portable, durable and affordable, the BOOK is the entertainment wave of the future, and many new titles are expected soon, due to the surge in popularity of its programming tool, the Portable Erasable-Nib Cryptic Intercommunication Language Stylus...**
Along with some smiles, this cyberquote stimulated a serious discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each medium and the implications for teachers of writing (http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/nwp/books.htm).

The E-journal Website continued to evolve throughout the summer. Eventually it included an overview of the project, a listing and description of the participating sites, an E-team page, guidelines for participation, a form for posting E-journal entries, as well as links to the entries. Throughout the summer we received an interesting mix of writing: writing about pedagogy, creative writing, group writing, and individual reflections. Others used the E-journal as a place to explore tentative ideas in informal ways. By summer's end there were some 78 E-journal entries submitted from the seventeen participating sites.

Some writers gave us finished work, as with this excerpt from “A Sense of Place,” by Cathie English from the Nebraska Writing Project (http://wwwgse.berkeley.edu/research/nwp/Ejournal/23.html):

There’s a vast stretch of river that I have in possession. It’s the most valuable possession in my memory. It’s mine because it never leaves me, and I know it well, like you know a loved one’s anatomy—gestures, voice, and intimate glances.

The voice of my river is a softened whisper, “Shh, shh, shh,” she says as the water laps the sand, gently soothing a weary, working soul. My river sees islands of green far into the horizon, the silvery green merging with the light blue Nebraska sky. Cottonwood tree leaves illuminate, reflect the intense July sun, and the trees’ gentle down floats onto the water’s surface like white teardrops. The river touches humanity with its everlasting water, reviving a soul with its cool touch, refreshing the waders who walk the sand laden miles up or downstream, investigating its hidden secrets...
All did not proceed smoothly, however. Around mid-summer, the E-team faced a crisis: a problematic piece of writing was submitted for publication. We had anticipated receiving writing that might offend some readers, but we had not resolved the issue of how to address it. We wanted to encourage our writers but we also needed to be conscious of the sensibility of our audience. Then, within the span of 48 hours, the questionable piece of writing was withdrawn by the home site because of these same considerations and as a team we were not forced to act on this issue.

This incident did bring to the foreground, however, an interesting conversation that we are still continuing and hope to broaden. While the piece was read in one light at the home site, it raised many questions when presented to a national audience. Writing that is appropriate and understood at a local site might not be appropriate for a larger audience. This incident also highlights the range of voices and experiences among TCs throughout the country.
and focuses attention on some of the sticky issues surrounding being an artist
and a teacher in a diverse world.

In our conversations a number of possible strategies have surfaced for
future E-journals and we’d like to encourage national TCs to continue this
discussion. One strategy that emerged promises to engage each local community
in review and publishing of creative writings. In fact, four of the participating
sites published writings locally last summer: Central Washington Writing
Project published an anthology (http://www.cwu.edu/~cwwp/who.html );
the Dakota Writing Project posted bios, writings, and demonstration info
(http://www.usd.edu/engl/97teachers.html); Oregon Writing Project at the
University of Oregon left an archive written by and about their Fellows (http://
www.owp.uoregon.edu/people.html); and the Red Cedar Writing Project
created a calendar with links to their institute presentations (http://
writing.msu.edu/rcwp/demo.html) as well as a daily log of activities/events
(http://writing.msu.edu/rcwp/day1page1.html). In addition, the six sites of
Rural Voice, Country Schools created their own page (www-gse.berkeley.edu/
Research/NWP/rvcs.html).

Along with the World Wide Websites and the email lists, some E-journal
participants also participated in real-time discussions on the Internet, called
MOOs. MOOs are Multi-User Virtual Domains where participants can log into
and “talk” (type) in real-time to other users using some simple commands. (see
the MOOBoard for more information, http://www.cwu.edu/~cwwp/
mooboard/). The E-journal, the website and the MOO became diverse doors
and windows into and through which participants could enter into
conversations and relationships with one another. Especially in the light of
arguments that technology will destroy person-to-person relationships, one
thing that this project demonstrated is how these technologies can make
possible the enhancement and extension of those relationships in ways that
would be otherwise impossible.

We have no way to measure the full impact of the E-journal, but we have
some pretty good indications. Joan Taylor, director of the Northern Nevada
WP, offered these observations of the E-team’s work in the conference:

I was so engrossed in reading the E-team’s work from this summer
that I wanted to say a few things about what I learned and reflected upon
as I read... The E-journal work... echoed and gave modeled examples of NWP work in:
* community building and scaffolding for continuity,
* acknowledgment and welcome of new arrivals,
* shared leadership and joint decision-making,
* support to one another as leaders/innovators,
* modeling to motivate and challenge others to contribute,
* focused discussions and guided questioning,
* immersion in the process as the product takes shape,
* dilemma of participants offending other participants,
* edit/censorship/conscious of audience issues.

The whole group communicated and interacted with so much finesse, and in addition took it all out beyond institute walls. The process of the team's interaction was worth the reading time...

A couple of the E-journal pieces were also used outside the context of the E-journal project. In one instance, an essay titled “The Difference” was submitted to the E-journal by Julia Hewitt from the National Writing Project in Vermont. A very interesting and well-written piece about a student’s activism in the face of homophobia and misunderstandings about sexuality issues throughout his school, this article jumped out to Shirley Brown as a perfect essay for introducing the School District of Philadelphia’s Policy 102. Shirley was facilitating the Philadelphia Writing Project’s Summer Institute II at the time and was set to talk about this policy on race, gender, sexuality issues in the district. She wrote to Julia and asked permission to use the article. Julia responded enthusiastically that Shirley was welcome to share the piece. And, in another instance, Dolores of the Marshall University Writing Project read the submission from Susan Ordille of the Philadelphia writing project titled “Introduction to Self” and asked if she could use the piece in an upcoming freshman English class. These exchanges were very exciting and get the to heart of the potential of the E-journal.

We also have a few early returns from a survey that we’ve distributed to the mailing list and through the E-journal coordinators (the survey is also available on-line at http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/nwp/esurvey.htm). We can only hope that this response is representative of what the experience meant for others:

The E-journal participants in our institute benefited from the excitement in learning something new, individual and collective pride in accomplishment, and the encouragement and opportunity to explore the possibilities for teaching and learning via the Internet. Even the most uncertain and timid among us came away with enthusiasm for this new dimension to our learning/publishing/teaching/professional development. I can truthfully say that had it not been for the E-journal experience, the Internet would still be something that other people “did” and from which I felt excluded...

This summer’s work helped to show that there are three distinct dimensions to this work: encouraging/supporting TCs as writers, prompting/collecting stories about the teaching of writing, and facilitating on-line conversations about TCs’ work within the writing project.

And, of course, there’s your perspective. We encourage you to take a look at the E-journal Website. While you’re there, you may respond to the writings, and let us know what you think about future themes for the E-journal. If you were a participant in the E-journal last summer you can also find the assessment survey on-line (http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/research/nwp/esurvey.htm). The E-team can be reached at eteam_list@socrates.berkeley.edu. Your participation and input are critical to realizing the promise of the Internet as host of ongoing, nationwide professional conversations.