My Beliefs About Teaching Before the National Writing Project (and How They Have Changed)

by Susan Bennett

I began my teaching career in East Los Angeles County during the fall of 1968. I had been assured by the recruiter from Southern California visiting my campus student career center during an Ohio snowstorm that La Puente was a quick freeway commute to the beach, UCLA, and other popular locations. As the snow outside the windows mixed with yesterday’s slush and ice, I was more than ready to believe the tanned, well-manicured personnel director who described the K-8 school in a district offering emergency credentials to out-of-state teachers qualified to teach junior high school language arts.

Five months later, naive, inexperienced, and idealistic, I stepped off a plane in LAX eager to begin a lifetime of firsts. The first time I was ever behind the wheel of a car alone was the day I drove to my first day of teaching; both experiences were horrifying. But I learned fast. I learned what to do when a twelve-year-old slumps under his desk from too many reds at “nutrition” break. I learned how to negotiate the Hollywood freeway at 5:00 P.M. I learned how to stay up all night and grade 180 papers and smile the next morning when recess was canceled for a smog alert. I learned how to wait until my first break at 1:00 to go to the restroom.

Several years, two degrees, and 1500 miles later, I began working with a writing project site. Now, three decades after my first year of teaching, inspired by almost twenty years of association with a writing project, I continue to reflect on my life as a teacher, but most dramatically, I continue to unlearn lessons of thirty years ago, some of which are chronicled below.

What I Believed About Teaching Before My Work with an NWP Site:

1. That I was solely responsible for every aspect of my classroom. At age twenty-one, armed with a bachelor of science in education degree, I was to have come equipped with all the answers, instructional techniques, and curricular possibilities. The school provided me with an adequate supply of “teacher-proof” materials and a district handbook of rules, policies and procedures. Asking for help meant I was deficient, weak, or inadequate.

2. That I had better keep my door closed to assure no one witnessed or heard any of my “mistakes.” Mistakes were a sign of incompetence.

3. That I had better not ask for help with curriculum, instructional techniques, or classroom management. If I couldn’t solve my own problems, I obviously wasn’t suited to teaching.

4. That there was a hierarchy of power and control: the principal was our patriarch; the custodian our house mother; the office staff, the handmaids to the important people and the keepers of the ditto masters. The principal would be “grading” my lesson plans each week. Teachers’ lives outside of the classroom were expected to reflect the standards and good taste as defined by the administration.

5. That teachers who cared about personal interests, hobbies, or financial recompense were morally corrupt and should feel guilty for their worldly concerns. As professionals we should not be concerned with such crass issues as working conditions and work load, pay for services rendered, employee control of the profession, teacher organizations or unions. Our only concern should be our “students’ welfare.”

6. That universities were to be distrusted as effete, idealistic, radical, arrogant “ivory towers.”

What I Learned from Working With an NWP Site:

1. I learned that teaching shouldn’t be a lonely profession. Those who try to keep us “divided and conquered” are tyrants, not leaders. Those who insult us with “teacher-proof” materials know nothing about the acts of teaching or learning. The NWP ended my feelings of isolation as a teacher.

2. I learned the value of reflective teaching and the teacher as researcher. That only through our mistakes, trials, errors, and successes do we learn what constitutes effective teaching. The more we understand and share our mistakes with others, the more information we accumulate that will help us to improve teaching and learning. The NWP erases our guilt for “making mistakes” and celebrates our thirst for self-knowledge.

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3. I am comforted by the recognition that the really important questions and difficult problems are best attacked by groups of informed, caring professionals rather than by individuals. The cliché “two heads are better than one” is true and thirty heads can be even better. Collaboration and cooperation are necessary for us to survive as educators, for our students to mature into adulthood and for our educational system to improve into the next century. The NWP provides us with the opportunity to collaborate and cooperate. No one person — practitioner or “expert” — is required to have all the answers.

4. I am reminded that teachers deserve to be treated as adults who are qualified decision-makers. We must be trusted to make wise choices for the benefit of our students and for ourselves as professionals and individuals. Schools must relinquish the hierarchical factory model with efficiency as a goal and with administrators at the top, assembly line workers in the middle and a product at the bottom. Treating teaching as an “entry level” position is demeaning to the role and the person performing the very complex responsibilities of educator. The NWP validates and admires what teachers know while encouraging teachers to share expertise with colleagues; it infuses teachers with confidence and a renewed sense of professionalism; and it recognizes the classroom teacher as the strongest link in the institutional chain.

5. I am validated that demanding financial recompense for our duties and placing a high value on our time does not diminish our commitment, altruism, dedication or professionalism. Who else but classroom teachers are expected to “volunteer” for lunch duty, chaperone responsibilities, club sponsor, after-school workshops, and summer workshops? Our expectations for respect and enough financial security to take our places in society should not be used against us. The NWP rewards classroom teachers with respect and financial remuneration for their contributions to the profession just like consultants from the private sector or administrative ranks are paid fees for their time and ideas.

6. I can admit my love affair with universities without being considered a traitor to practice. I learned many useful things in the universities I attended — about theory as well as practice. Not every class I attended was obviously useful, and most were not immediately applicable, but the presence of all my professors — magnificent and miserable — have contributed to the educator I am today and the most obscure literary definition is part of the amalgamation of my collective knowledge. I know how to judge tomorrow’s new ideas and who to read today.

Universities served me well, but the preparation to be a teacher never ends. When we complain we “didn't learn anything at the university and theory and research is only so much hogwash anyway,” we only look foolish to the outside world. No wonder we are distrusted by our critics. Would you go to a dentist or accountant who said she never learned anything useful or practical at the university? The NWP recognizes the value of diverse educational environments and places them as equals in a partnership of learning and researching.

7. I have seen, from the time I began teaching in California to the present, inservice opportunities grow from nothing to a plethora of choice. Significant research conducted on the effects of inservice education consistently places the NWP on “most effective” lists — sometimes alone. The benefits to both those teachers presenting and those receiving NWP inservice programs is a triumph of the NWP.

What I am Still Learning from Working With a National Writing Project Site:

Without doubt, I am continuing to learn ways to be a more effective teacher. Even though now I teach at the college level, I am constantly reminded how much I can learn from the primary teacher as well as the middle school and high school teacher. As learners and teachers, we are as alike as we are different. Both our uniqueness and commonalities must be acknowledged.

I am learning how to better trust my teaching colleagues, and to delegate both responsibilities and authority without feeling guilty that I am solely responsible for everything that crosses my desk or my mind. Collaboration and cooperation are not cheating.

I am still learning that, in spite of its trials, teaching is a rewarding profession and deserving of pride and commitment. Finally, I am learning that no matter how great teaching demands may become, as long as the National Writing Project exists, I am not alone.