Extending the Invitational:
An Online, Intersite Conversation

by Joan Taylor

with an introduction by Gary Obermeyer

If there was ever a group with the potential to benefit from electronic networking, it's the NWP site directors. Collectively, site directors are responsible for preparing thousands of new teacher leaders nationwide each year through NWP's premiere event, the invitational summer institute, yet each director works in relative isolation from the others. Increasing communication among directors could result in a wide spectrum of benefits as they exchange ideas on topics of mutual interest.

Site directors, then, are prime candidates for electronic networking, which can provide them a quick and easy way to share news and ideas with one another. In the fall of 1996, the NWP network design team set up an electronic discussion list (http://www.teleport.com/~obeec/mailinglist.htm) and invited site directors to participate. Now we offer directors the convenience of being able to address more than 100 colleagues by sending one email to a list server. Likewise, replies can be sent to the whole group as easily as they can to an individual.

In the following article, Joan Taylor of the Northern Nevada Writing Project describes how she found camaraderie and solutions online through the NWP site directors' discussion list.

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Certainly, one of the interesting things about writing project sites is the individualism they exercise within their own communities while maintaining the integrity of the BAWP model. While many sites use local advisory boards who have a valued sense of individual site history and needs, technology now provides access to additional advisory sources that include others in similar and not-so-similar situations, a connection to those who are perhaps dealing with common issues and can assist in exploring solutions to current problems.

With great stretches of distance isolating Nevada teachers and with the rapid population growth in our state necessitating multi-track yearround schools, I sought out other directors' assistance in exploring ways to shorten the out-of-town stay and out-of-classroom days our invitational required. Two of our most important concerns were:

- How will we deal with multi-track yearround school schedules where teachers' contracted days off are three week periods, staggered throughout the calendar year?
- How can we keep teachers better connected after the summer institute is over?

Following the advice of NWP network consultant Gary Obermeyer, I posted a question online to nwp.forum asking other site directors for their input on the issue of meeting for four summer weeks and extending the invitational to three fall Saturday meetings. Several indicated they shared like considerations and were experimenting with various invitational summer institute models.

I think many directors and TCs struggle to understand how to continue a meaningful connection between writing project participants after the Invitational Summer Institute when their lives are so full of personal and professional concerns and opportunities.

Janet Swenson, Director
Red Cedar Writing Project

I like the idea. I will wait for your evaluation. We tried the 4 weeks (20 days) this year. As director, I did not like the schedule as well as the five week program. Your idea sounds like a good alternative. I hope it works. Let us know.

Marianne Darr-Norman, Co-Director
Indiana Writing Project

In addition to Janet and Marianne, generous insights, suggestions and some commiseration came from throughout NWP's vast domain including Carol Tateishi, Bay Area Writing Project; Marcia Venegas-Garcia Director, San Diego Area Writing Project; Robin Drury, Central California Writing Project; Margaret M. Lyday, Lehigh Valley Writing Project; Angelia Moore, Southwest Georgia Writing Project; Harriet Williams Santee-Wateree Writing Project; and Tom Fox, Northern California Writing Project.

I printed out a hard copy of all the text and highlighted the portions with calendar schedule possibilities and "to do" recommendations. The number one suggestion was — no surprises here — write! Their collective wisdom also included:

- Provide informal time to reconnect and link current work with summer study and discussions;
- Provide substance to write, read, discuss, inquire, share current classroom practices and student work, launch teacher research questions;
- Provide leadership roles in project work and innovations, inservice planning, continuity for participants.

To see the focused question and complete responses, visit our on-line documentation at http://www.unr.edu/unr/colleges/educ/nnwp/, and go to "Extended Invitationals Study."
When we studied the evaluations of fall session participants, it seems that extending the professionally committed time for teacher study and discourse within the invitational institute schedule was beneficial. It offered greater sustained support for change and more time for thorough reflection in both short-term and long-term situations. There was additional time for professional reading and enough distance from the exhaustion of the summer institute to allow for renewed energy and ideas in creating and assuming leadership roles.

Melissa wrote, “The beginning of summer seems ages ago ... like a whole different lifetime.” Many nodded in agreement.

Another participant wrote, “I really have enjoyed getting together to share, write and remind myself of all the changes I wanted to make in my classroom. Being here energizes me.”

Our next step in staying connected beyond the fall meetings was an attempt at getting all our participants on-line with e-mail connections to begin extending beyond our extended invitational. Past participants had expressed regret in not being able to regularly follow up on one another’s writing, research and practices once school had started when distance barriers and time crunches were compounded by other professional and personal commitments.

This year’s invitational institute fellows saw the invitational as a “jumping off place” rather than an end in itself. Now I’m concerned about how to keep that momentum going. Although we never had the ability to stay connected on-line before, we could always have written via “snail mail” and we never seemed to find the time. How will this be different? How can we help to make it different?

While important on-line networking incentives are time and money factors, the benefits to directors and TCs can actually go far beyond that. I accessed advice and information that, even if I had had more available resources, couldn’t have better suited my specific needs. Thank you to all those busy directors who shared their valuable time and expertise. I invite those of you who are interested in further discussion to contact me at joantay@nvbell.net.