Listen to the Rural Voices

by Ann Gardner, Site Coordinator
Northern Arizona Writing Project

Listen to the small voices, trust the process, and listen to the children. These phrases echo in my mind as I watch Sara’s and Jennifer’s hands emphasize every point. The fifth grade girls kneel in their chairs, feet flopping over the backs, brunette hair blending against stark blonde as they work at peer revision.

“You might want to add a prepositional phrase to this sentence to tell what the hair looked like in your poem,” Jennifer suggests as they read the line again.

“You’re right. I need to use a stronger noun in the line too.” Sara scribbles a correction at the side of the page. “You, as a reader, don’t have a picture of the man. I need to make him real by strengthening him. How about if I name him?” And, a discussion follows of naming the newly created bald-headed man who once was just “man.”

“Yes,” I cheer as the process unfolds. “Yes!” The video camera records as a small victory lifts its head in the din of my principally Navajo classroom.

This is a peek at the documentation and public engagement program which is Rural Voices, Country Schools where rural teacher consultants from six rural writing project sites are looking deep within classroom processes and recording victories. The places we come from are diverse, as are our students, communities, and writing projects: Northern Arizona, Southeastern Louisiana, Third Coast (Michigan), Nebraska, Southcentral Pennsylvania, and Central Washington. Supported by a grant from the Annenberg Rural Challenge, we are identifying and capturing effective teaching and learning practices in rural schools in order to make quality rural education more visible locally, regionally, and nationally.

We began our work by forming teams of eight teacher consultants from rural schools. Each site decided how their team would be organized and how those teachers would be particularly suited to express the unique character of teaching and learning in their place. As a group of 48 we gathered at a week-long national workshop to explore approaches to documentation, investigate current classroom practice in each of our areas, and plan for the work ahead. We were tantalized by presentations from teacher consultants in the California Documentation Project, the Urban Sites Network, and M-Class. But most importantly, our teams presented to each other a view of teaching and learning in our home places, drawing on artifacts, images, student work, and published accounts we brought with us. And, of course, we wrote. As each team shared its local challenges and successes in creative presentations, we realized the work of documentation had already begun.

Along with the other projects and partners in the Annenberg Rural Challenge, we hope we are starting a movement to look at learning within rural classrooms and to value rural places and people. Web sites are appearing on computers from Washington to Michigan. Teachers are on E-mail with questions about successful rural practices from Arizona to Louisiana. Students in Louisiana are reading their writings to PTA and civic groups. At national parks in Arizona, students’ and teachers’ writings about rural life are being showcased. Children in Washington are involved in a Salmon Festival, and then walk to the nearby river to record what they have learned about life cycles in their place. Young people are talking about what is good in the places where we live, be it Nebraska or Pennsylvania. Rural Voices, Country Schools will affect rural classrooms far into the future for… we listen to the small voices. We listen to the children. We listen to ourselves.
Memoir

It is said that the cost of something is the amount of your life you’re willing to exchange for it. I understand that when I hear our small, rural communities ridiculed for being “backwards” because they fight so hard to remain those places grandfather remembers. In these communities, the cost of things is shared and people live, work, raise families and worship together in the spirit of the Swedish proverb, “a sorrow shared is cut in half and a joy shared is doubled.” Grandpa and people like him were not willing to trade their lives for things, no matter how convenient they promised life would be. There is more of a balance struck between the needs of the community and the earth, and the promise of the future does not overshadow the lessons and importance of the past.

Crucial to my Grandpa was the knowledge that progress could not come without proper deference to the land and the rituals of past. I understand what he means when I see those who try to progress without respect for the earth lose chunks of landscape to erosion at Lake Michigan, fail to see that deer tiptoe onto the roadway, turn their heads away in disbelief or indifference when the headlines are horrible.

Recently, relying on high science and her propensity towards finding the answers, we must understand we may have something incredible to offer, but it is not just the 3 milking
began receiving incredible images from a planet more than 3 million miles away. I wonder what Grandpa would make of those images if he were here to read his morning paper. He would not be impressed, because he understood that as we learn the answer to Mars we lose the power of the questions about it; as its landscapes come into focus, ours fade a little more. He would believe that probe is one planet too many removed from his neighborhood in his town where he, then his children, and, for a short time, his grandchildren, played happily under a moon made of green cheese.

And now, as I turn the key on the lock to enter his house to visit my Grandmother, I think about the quality of my life compared to his and know we have a long way to go until we have come the long way home.
I met Susan Wren on one occasion. The effect was indelible. We stood on a hill, she chattered her beautiful spirit of wonder, and I was educated by her soul.

After her passing, I found her described in my Oregon field guide’s description of the winter wren:

“conspicuous mainly by its song, a prolonged, varied, often-repeated virtuoso sequence of high trills and chatters. It moves in a darting mouse-like manner, . . maintains a low profile among the brush, and goes to great lengths to keep its nest a secret.”

Susan, I miss your song.

Kim Stafford, Oregon Writing Project, Lewis & Clark College
In memory of Susan Wren, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, who died shortly after the Walker Creek institute.
Rain
As it pours life giving glory over the valley below it seems to cleanse the land of all uncleanliness creatures praise the shower upon them then leaves having done its duty then seems to declare its going to now clean the valley beneath

Jacob Westover
4th Grade Student, Northern Arizona
The Color of Opossum

It's early, or it's not—
Cold, and the skin of your ankles is wrinkled
And the pillow's case also wrinkled
the sheets, the corners of both eyes.
The sky pale and wrinkled,
Both your legs:
(you lie in the morning
or crouch of the corner of the bed,
tucking in the edges, smoothing your skull and its roundness.)

Marj Hogan, Central Washington Student

Reflection on the Goals of Rural Voices, Country Schools

Through all of our plans runs the concept of how a greater sense of one's community can enhance a student's involvement and achievement. A clear perception of a community's physical presence is only the beginning of a student's journey. We hope to help them begin to see how they are indeed linked to a heritage, a sense of history and the knowledge that they can contribute. These contributions will begin with their being a part of the revitalization of rural education with a sense of hope and the power to change what needs to be changed, to revitalize the well-being of those around them. As we begin to map out for others what is good about rural schools, we seek to help students see more than the pollution in the streams and the slag piles of the cast-offs from the mines. We want them to begin to see in themselves the dignity of their birthplaces and the world from many vantage points. See the world and themselves in many colors, from many sides so they can live their lives with their heads up should they stay in Southcentral Pennsylvania. Or should they leave.

Susan Purdy Amendt, Site Coordinator
Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project
Nebraskan at Walker Creek

I take pictures,
frame fields and hills in
the viewfinder of my mind,
slip the shutter at fractions of seconds
to bleed light stains
into memory.
Stones find their way into my
pocket, sage taped to
pages of a notebook,
evidence of images, strands
belonging to
a place I commune with.

Birds make sounds mostly
that twitter and tease
the visual and physical yearning
for holding beauty in
my mind. Until this
one lights a golden breast
to the morning sun and
I feel thankful to be here.

Phip Ross, Nebraska Writing Project

Language

Chee’ teaches me patiently
a little bit of Navajo
little bit at a time
Telling me that soon
I will know my language
He says pretty soon
“Askee,” grandson, pretty soon
but
you will have to be patient
like me.

Sherwood D. Begay
5th Grade Student, Northern Arizona

Amy Hottovy, Nebraska Writing Project

(Amy’s Nebraska school of 43 students, Rising City, is threatened by
new property tax laws that require at least 60 students in a school.)
Leaving for the Promised Land

When my mother was still quite a young woman she left the liquid moving whitecap tossing whiteoam swirling of the eastern sea for the stalwart upright straight corn gauntlets of the midwest and began to tell me not in so many words but in so many ways to leave.

Even then my self cried out for the sea we'd left. I walked the up down up down of the railroad tracks buoyed by the creosote perfume, the scent of docks that missed me.

And I hung my walls with seascapes.

Leave this place. This suffocation of green Leave this place. And I flowed with the tide moved by the tyranny of sighs and all the time I listened and heard the words not said, and wondered would the water be the cure.

And her walls were hung with seascapes.

Pen Campbell, Third Coast Writing Project

Response to the poem “Reassurance” by Alice Walker

“Locked rooms full of treasure.” Faith in the fragment — that's what Kim Stafford said. Writers are locked rooms full of treasure. My pen is my blind and groping key — never fully knowing what lock it may open — what treasure it seeks to reveal. For the intent is the opening of the door; the prize — the reward — for that is the treasure of words and images that unfold on my page — squeezed out of the space occupied by doubt. Scared often, groping always, questioning the existence of the treasure. Having faith in the unsealed letters that come before, their pages prodding me. I celebrate even when the lock is unmanageable, when the door is swollen from the heat, when the opening is most frustrating and I am tempted to bash through — I suspect that what beyond lies magnificence.

Christa Allan, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project