NWP Leaders Raise Questions on Standards

Directors aim to put classrooms, students, and teachers at the center of the debate

By Art Peterson

We had gathered at the Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., for a civilized discussion of ways the National Writing Project can make a positive contribution to the educational standards movement.

But we first had to deal with the visceral stuff. When presenter and Philadelphia Writing Project director Marci Resnick asked us to write on the question “What do you think of when you think about standards?” the predictable uneasiness surfaced. There were stories of

- students made so bleary by test prep exercises that their post-test scores were lower than their pre-test scores.

As Resnick pointed out, she had asked us to think about standards and we had responded with our concerns about testing. “The problem is not with the standards,” said Kathleen O’Shaughnessey, National Writing Project of Acadiana (LA) co-director. “It is with the testing instruments.”

Yet the focus of many, both inside and outside education, is on the scores with little attention to what is being scored—or how. Resnick and co-presenters Ellen Brinkley, Third Coast (MI) Writing Project director, and Jean Hicks, Louisville Writing Project director, are working to put classrooms, students, and teachers at the center of the standards discussion.

Since 1995, when Resnick and her Philadelphia colleagues first started working with schools on standards, they have asked the key question: “How can the standards movement provide an opportunity to deepen and extend our conversations about learning and improve our practice?”

“Of course,” said Resnick, “not every school saw the pursuit of such a broad-based inquiry as the quick fix they were looking for to improve their test scores. They would ask ‘Can you make us do really good?’ Obviously, we couldn’t, certainly not with our traditional ten-session series.”

But truth in advertising was not a characteristic of every inservice program operating in Philadelphia at the time. “They’d say, ‘Buy us. We’ll do it for you.’ Some of these programs weren’t even aligned with the standards. Of course, they didn’t raise scores and ended up paying a lot of money back,” said Resnick.

Putting the Questions in Order

What Resnick and the Philadelphia project settled on was a plan for some five sessions that, they believed, put the questions about standards in the right order:

- What is the range and variety of standards we currently have for our students?

- How, when, and why do we look at student work?

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- What are some ways of looking?
- What can we learn by looking closely at our classrooms?
- How can we use standards to look at student and teacher work?

Following these inquiries came a series of questions intended not only to make sense of the participants' observations but to recognize teachers as leaders:

- What do we know?
- What are our questions?
- How do we share what we've learned from our colleagues?

During these sessions, participants looked at videotapes of classrooms, observing and responding to what they saw that was relevant to student literacies. They studied student work samples focusing on the surprises and puzzles raised by this work.

They looked in depth at such genres as the "I-search paper." How, they asked, does this form fit into a standards curriculum? How do we assess this kind of work? At another session, they looked at student work in the context of developing rubrics and practicing holistic scoring. "The student work," says Resnick, "was always at the center of our inquiries."

While Resnick and her colleagues have remained true to their core belief that the focus of standards work must be on teaching and learning, they have, as successful writing projects always do, tailored their work to the needs of teachers. "At first we took the long-range approach, but teachers had more immediate needs. We've listened." So now, for instance, the Philadelphia project is offering a five-session elementary school series, "Integrating Science and Writing." At one session, participants observe and describe hermit crabs, then generate and explore their own questions about these crabs and write about the experience in learning logs. This session connects specifically to types of writing on which students are assessed.

Making the Connections

Ellen Brinkley in Michigan comes at standards from a different but equally useful direction. She and her colleagues start from the depressing fact that, these days, any entity seeking professional respectability needs to have formulated its own list of standards. The result is that classroom teachers are confronted with a confusing and sometimes contradictory hodgepodge of demands. What the Third Coast folks have done is bring some order out of chaos, helping classroom teachers find threads that run through standards so that teachers can approach them in manageable pieces.

Third Coast has produced a document, Teaching and Testing Writing in Michigan: Correlation of Michigan Writing Assessments with State Standards, National Standards and Best Practice, that makes connections between state writing assessment tasks and state standards. For instance, the assessment asks students to "decide the genre and approach to fulfill a writing task," while the state standards require "students to demonstrate understanding of issues and problems by making connections and generating themes within and across texts." The Third Coast document also shows how these standards correlate with those of the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, in this case with the NCTE statement "students adjust their use of … language … to communicate effectively and for different purposes."

Further, the "best practice" advocated by the Third Coast Writing Project also supports these standards. "On many occasions, students are able to decide their own topic, purpose, and genre for writing." The reader, perusing this document, is left with the distinct and justified impression that the work of the Third Coast Writing Project is consistent with the Michigan Writing Tests and content standards.

Predicting New Developments

As Jean Hicks describes it, the standards situation in Kentucky is somewhat different. In that state, standards and state assessment have been around for a number of years and have, in fact, been guided by writing project people working at the state Department of Education. The state now has in place a portfolio assessment that attempts to measure growth over time and provide a content area test and holistic scoring guide, which Hicks says "gives teachers and students language for talking about writing."

Hicks and her Louisville colleagues have developed a 30-hour program above the master's level based on the Kentucky "Experienced Teacher Standards" and NWP guiding principles. The program requires participants to evaluate their performance in relation to Kentucky learner goals. Based on this self-analysis, teachers then implement a professional development plan.

But even Hicks, working in a state where standards and assessment have long been in place, would agree that, as the standards movement and the writing project's response to it evolve, we can anticipate some predictable and many unexpected developments. Brinkley says, "More writing is happening in Michigan than has ever happened before." That's good.

Resnick says that, in Philadelphia, as standards, assessments, and tests have become dominant features of the educational landscape, the powers that be have not taken a breather. Rather, they have added more tests. That's maybe not so good.

Hicks, speaking as an observer and participant in Kentucky's more seasoned system of standards and assessment, observes, "What looked like apprentice writing a few years ago now looks like novice writing."

Is this because Kentucky teachers are raising their standards or because young Kentucky writers are becoming more skilled? Let's hope the correct answer is "both of the above."