Sky’s the Limit with Rural Voices Radio

BY KIM STAFFORD

I remember my dissertation advisor giving me a life-saving piece of advice: “Dissertations that start simple,” he said, “become complex. Dissertations that begin complex become impossible.” Was he ever right! I started with an elementary idea, and after a year of researching and writing, I barely escaped alive.

Then, in the summer of 1998, a group of teachers from six rural writing project sites met in Santa Fe to talk about our common goal of sharing stories from rural schools. Someone suggested the notion that we consider radio as a way of getting our work out into the world. Like the kernel that inspired my dissertation, this seemed like a simple enough idea. But as with that work, this endeavor too grew much more complicated.

The six sites were tight by then. We had already held one institute in common the previous summer, a week at Walker Creek Ranch in California. Then, back home, the eight teachers from each of the six sites had carried out “public engagement” projects, to share the good work of Tierra Amarilla. She’s kind of an independent radio producer. I wonder what would happen if she came down to Santa Fe to talk with us?*

I had met Deborah Begel years before back east in Central Park on a beautiful day. We had stayed in touch, and when I called to ask if she might come to meet with a group of eager National Writing Project teachers, she was intrigued.

“I bet I live in a smaller town than any of them,” she said. “Let’s see what might happen.” So Deborah brought her recording equipment to Santa Fe, did a demonstration of storytelling by radio, and uttered her irresistible, highly dangerous call: “The sky’s the limit with radio.” It sounded so simple.

We bit on that, and we bit hard. Within hours, we were talking about a grand scheme. Teachers could go home, we decided, and begin writing with their students about a “sense of place.”

Their schools with local communities. And now these eight teacher teams from rural Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Washington were ready to share their work with a broader audience.

“I have a friend,” I said at one of our meetings, “who lives right up the road from Santa Fe in
We bit on that, and we bit hard. Within hours, we were talking about a grand scheme. Teachers could go home, we decided, and begin writing with their students about a “sense of place.” These writings could include poems, essays, stories, profiles of local characters, incantations of all kinds. They could report on family stories, resonant landscapes, the mysteries and epiphanies of small towns. Both students and teachers could write about the certainties and puzlements of life on the farm, the busy hive of the local school, and other strange wonders of rural America. When the time was right, we said, Deborah could travel to each of the six writing project sites for studio recordings of students and teachers reading their writings, and also field recordings of local sound: a tractor starting up, a thunderstorm, the creak of a cellar door, the throaty shouts of a thousand cranes lifting off the water.

Then we would “simply” put it all together in a series of six programs for free distribution to local stations nationwide. We were caught in the current of our own enthusiasm. With the help of our fearless leader, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, and later of her assistant,Laura Paradise, at the National Writing Project, we found some money in the Annenberg grant that was funding the “Rural Challenge” project that had brought us together, and we were off. Little did we know.

Our teacher-heroes did their magic. Kids wrote about grandma’s hand and the midnight wail of the train. Teachers wrote about their own indelible childhoods and the children of now. Kids and teachers together wrote about prejudice, and longing, and hurt. Recipes, chores, music, and the homework the heart keeps doing through it all.

Then, after intense local preparations, Deborah arrived at each site with her broadcast-quality mics and DAT recorder and cables and batteries and pluck. Kids and teachers read, and read again. Then they led her to the back alleys, railroad yards, rivers and farms where she could harvest local sound. Back home, Deborah catalogued the takes, drafted scripts to sequence them, shared these drafts with teacher-teams, and with me. By phone and email and fax we whittled down the sprawling treasure of each site to 28 minutes of air time. Then I went into the studio in Oregon, with Deborah listening from New Mexico, and we recorded the narration tracks.

With that narration “in the can,” we went the next creative step: a teacher or two from each site traveled to Deborah’s studio in New Mexico for the final mix, gathering in a final sequence the student and teacher voices, local sounds, the narration, and the music — wonderful homegrown music from all over.

As I write this account, the final frenzy of the production process is at that stage my advisor warned me about: almost impossible intensity. Yesterday I counted 27 emails about the design for the CD package alone. For the six half-hour, broadcast-ready programs are about to be released, and there is a thicket of decisions to make. We're waiting for endorsements (Oprah said no, but Ray Suarez said yes, and Studs Terkel, and Bill Moyers), and for confirmation of the spelling for dozens of student names. How can we be sure to credit the literally hundreds of helpers for this project?

Well, we can't. We will fail, somewhere. But the CDs will be wonderful all the same. They will be heard on radio stations across the country, played at home, in schools, for school boards. And perhaps best of all, they will be heard by all of you, if you avail yourselves of the set your writing project site will receive. Pass it ‘round, consider what your site might do with the radio voices of your own students and teachers. The sky’s the limit.

That's what Deborah Begel said. We took her challenge. With us all she worked like a dog, as the final arbiter of micro-seconds, sounds, the ultimate challenge of the final mix. She led us through the myriad details of this new dimension for the NWP. And now, dozens of our student and teacher voices will live in the sky over the bayous of Louisiana, the prairie horizons of Nebraska, far over the Michigan lakes, the upland hills of central Washington, the mines and farms and wooded ridges of western Pennsylvania, and the wide country of northern Arizona—Cottonwood, Cornville, Holbrook, Jeddito, Keams Canyon, Ganado, Old Oraibi.

I imagine radio becoming part of many NWP sites. The FCC is working to license a host of new local stations, and there may be a place for web-based audio, for student audio anthologies from individual schools, for subject-oriented audio programs, student audio portfolios, oral history programs. With Deborah’s help, the NWP audio pioneers have blazed this trail. You will hear their work. Where shall we go from here?

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