Wall of Literacy Learning Exemplifies Student Writing

BY LYNNE ALVINE

The “Rural Voices, Country Schools” project involved six teams of eight teacher researchers from rural National Writing Project sites located in Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Washington. Funded through NWP by a grant from the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the project focused on documentation and celebration of excellence in rural teaching and learning. In the 2 1/2 years of funding for the project, members of the six Rural Voices teams studied their own teaching and then looked for ways to reveal life in their classrooms to members of their schools and communities.

A Vision of Public Engagement
At a weekend retreat in April of 1998, members of the Rural Voices team and the site directors from the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project wrestled with a desire to “show, not tell” what good teachers do in classrooms in our region. How could we show the public all that is good in our rural schools? How could we open a window on classroom life to those who do not spend their lives in classrooms?

As we talked together, we began to envision a “wall of literacy” that would exemplify students’ writing development across the age ranges our team members represented, first grade through college. We would create this “wall of literacy” in a public space and invite parents, fellow teachers and members of the community to this public celebration of literacy learning. Looking for a public space for our display, we approached the director of the museum at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania with our proposal. Coincidentally, the director and the museum board had recently been discussing ways to link the university museum with local public schools! Our proposal fit the bill, and he offered us ample display space for one month the following spring semester.

Thus, one way the Southcentral Pennsylvania Rural Voices team responded to the Annenberg challenge to link schools and communities was to mount a seven-room display about literacy teaching and learning at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Museum from February 25 to March 28, 1999. The exhibit, titled “Rural Voices, Country Schools,” included photographs, classroom artifacts, videos and writings from both students and teachers. Over 500 visitors attended the exhibit in its four-week run, including parents, teachers, students, teacher educators, future teachers and other members of the university and community.

A Walk Through the Museum

Central Hallway
Visitors to the museum entered the “Rural Voices, Country Schools” exhibit through a central hallway where they were greeted by silhouettes of learners from first grade through college. Farther along the same wall, several photographs of students of different ages added faces from classrooms. Our introductory hallway also included a portrait and a brief professional biography of each team member as well as an enlarged photograph of our team.

Teacher as Writer
Visitors then entered a room featuring each of the team members as teachers who write. Each of the mounts in this room contained an enlarged photograph of the teacher working with students and one or more examples of that teacher’s writing.

Teacher as Researcher
In the next room, we exhibited part of the SPWP professional library available to our teacher consultants. Nearby we displayed several quotations, enlarged and mounted, from the writings of Donald Graves and other theorists important to the team members. We explained that many teachers strive to learn all they can about children and learning; one way we do this is by studying the writings of others. We also introduced visitors to a second way we learn: by studying our own classrooms as teacher researchers. We encouraged visitors to browse through the books and to consider the quotes on the walls. We noted that the quotes might reflect different philosophies of teaching and learning than those held by teachers in previous generations, such as when many visitors were themselves students.

Early Literacy Learning
In this room, we displayed artifacts containing environmental prints (photographs of adults and children reading together at home), examples of parent/teacher journals, a poster showing the early stages of learning to write, and examples of children’s writing at these earliest stages.

Student Engagement
The next room featured several collages of enlarged photos of students and teachers

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11
working together in small groups and pairs. To add movement and sound to the still images displayed on the walls, we also ran a video collage containing footage of the writing classrooms of the teachers on our team.

Portraits of Student Writers
Each teacher featured one student in the portrait room by exhibiting that student’s picture and detailed artifacts of the student’s writing processes, including early drafts and teacher and student comments as well as finished products. By looking at the portrait boards across the grade levels from first graders through college freshman, visitors could see how students progress through the years. Final, polished work from several other students was also on display in binders throughout the room.

Polished Products
In the last room, team members mounted displays of specific teaching strategies, including oral and other local history projects, life maps and desktop publishing. The room also contained portfolios of polished student work. A video collage in this room showed clips of students reading their original writings.

Response from the Community
On opening night, the IUP College of Fine Arts sponsored an opening reception for the exhibitors and invited guests. The gallery buzzed with excitement as parents, children, teachers, school administrators, and other members of the university and wider community toured the seven rooms of the exhibit. Local newspapers and the university student publication ran features about the project, noting the unique opportunity to view the processes and products of learning in area classrooms. During the four-week run of the exhibit, several IUP teacher educators brought groups of future teachers to the museum so they could see how the exhibit makers had chosen to document and share their work.

The exhibit was such a success that team members are producing materials to assist others who want to try a similar community outreach project. For more information on these materials, contact Lynne Alvine at the Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project (lalvine@grove.iup.edu).

Eight teachers created the museum exhibit with Southcentral Pennsylvania Writing Project directors Lynne Alvine and Carole Benich: TCs Sue Amendt, Mike Andolina, Jan Bowman, Kathy Broskin, Colleen Myers, Jeanne Mitsko, Carole Roberts and Susan Welsh.