Tapping the Potential
Building Teacher Leadership While Rethinking Your Site

By Ellen Brinkley and Anne-Marie Hall

Here are some writing project questions that site directors have often wondered about. Why is it that some directors stick around for years and others do not? Why do some “burn out” while others are energized by their work? During last summer’s Directors Retreat in Estes Park, Colorado, we had a chance to reflect on these questions.

Anne-Marie has been director of the Southern Arizona Writing Project for seven years, and Ellen has been director of Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University for six years. The two of us considered these questions in a manner consistent with the beautiful Estes Park setting. We drank lots of coffee, wrote, hiked, talked and gazed out the windows at gorgeous mountain peaks. We began to see a pattern. Sites where directors return year after year are sites with the courage to be flexible in how they define the role and the work of the director, and they are sites where directors trust the process of dispersing authority and responsibilities among teachers, thus inviting teachers to assume the leadership for the site.

These mountain talks became a session at the NWP Annual Meeting in Denver. We began by asking participants to write and talk about how they became leaders in their own sites. Both of us shared our stories as well.

Anne-Marie traced the specific tasks she performed from 1987 to 1993. She spoke of how she helped other directors with writing retreats, how she organized a state network meeting and much more. She was at the center of every program, busy “directing,” but also exhausted. Totally enervated rather than energized, she knew she had to be more creative at redefining her role or she would need to give up the job.

About that time she read a comment by Sheridan Blau, director of the South Coast Writing Project in California. His job, Sheridan said, was “keeping the copy machine running.” How could that be? Anne-

Marie began reflecting on what she found rewarding about directing a site, how she most of all enjoyed developing projects and then finding the people and funds to implement them. Sheridan’s comment began to make sense to her. She redefined her role so that she was on the margins of programs but no longer drained by directing each project from the center. She came to understand that once a project was designed and implemented, her main responsibility was to keep the copy machine running.

Ellen described how, especially in her project’s early years, she gave close attention to directing, staying intimately involved in site-based programs. As more site programs evolved, more teacher leadership developed. On several occasions teachers themselves have identified programs and projects that beg to be carried out. And teachers have volunteered to lead them. But like Anne-Marie, Ellen felt the pressure of being squeezed by too many details just to keep the good things happening, and she continues to redefine her role as director and seek new ways to invite teachers to step into new roles.

After we’d heard from everyone, we divided into two groups. Anne-Marie’s group discussed the role of the director at different sites and how we could more creatively define leadership. We decided that prioritizing comes first. How can directors carve out areas that enable them to exploit their own talents and not become burdened with tasks they dislike? Different directors shared their situations and began to articulate what parts of the job they really liked. For example, some directors love the summer institute and want to be at the center of that, so they delegate some of the other programs to codirectors. One director is excellent at administration and at writing grants; he feels his best contribution to his site is to seek and win the money to enable teachers to lead the programs they design. Another director shared that she generally oversees every program “looking at it from the margins, consulting, administrating,” but she says she is not at the center of any program. She has simply trusted the process begun in the summer institute: teachers are expected to be leaders and to be teachers of teachers there, so why not expect the same in all their programs?

Ellen’s group discussed ways to invite participants in our summer institutes to become teacher leaders. Because the summer institutes are the entry points for participation at NWP sites, we wanted to identify ways to make the development of teachers as leaders as basic to our summer institutes as the development of teachers as writers. Here are some of the ideas we generated, along with a few that we’ve added since then:

- Recognize the invitations to leadership we already provide. Make a list.
- Use language in brochures advertising the invitational summer institute that expresses the value we place on teacher knowledge and leadership. Make the invitation to teacher leadership explicit in all the materials we produce about our site.
- Invite Fellows to make many of the decisions about what to read and discuss.
- Encourage risk-taking that is essential to growth as leaders—in our summer institute writing, teaching demonstrations, discussions, etc.
- Encourage informal lunch discussions during the summer institute about grant opportunities, graduate programs, etc.
- Describe site-based leadership possibilities and needs—leaders of school-based workshops, book discussion groups, young writers camp, etc. Make a point in group discussions and informal conversations to plant leadership seeds by suggesting, “You might want to . . .” or “Maybe we could . . .” or “I want to invite you to . . .”
- Talk as leaders about professional turning points in our own lives and careers.
- Include presentations by TCs who can describe their professional growth in their school

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districts and in site-based projects. For example, include a teacher research workshop led by TCs, a reading by advanced institute participants, etc.

- Invite institute Fellows to get involved while they participate—designing a summer institute T-shirt, preparing an institute anthology, conferring with young writers from camp programs about pieces they will publish, or planning an administrators day program.

- Provide materials about professional organizations and encourage summer Fellows to join.

- Bring in a regional book rep who handles books often used in summer institutes and hold an end-of-institute professional book sale. (We’re amazed at how hungry our Fellows are for more!)

- Ask Fellows in each invitational institute to nominate representatives to serve on the site’s advisory committee.

- Build into the schedule a few Friday follow-up days during the next school year (funded by a grant) so institute Fellows can continue to support each other and rethink their identities as teacher leaders.

- Be available at continuity events and through phone calls and email to respond to queries from TCs who seek advice as they begin to take on new roles.

The session concluded when we shared with participants an activity we had experienced during the Directors Retreat. We each drew a house as a metaphor for our site. These varied from elaborate southern mansions to southwestern pueblos. Each had rooms or gardens or porches to represent different programs; each had architectural features to allow for expansion and remodeling. It was a visual experience that helped all of us see our sites in terms of the past, the present and the capacity for the future.