Sites Helping Sites: Technical Assistance NWP Style

by

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Prior to the NWP Annual Meeting in November, Jayne Marlink, Area 3 (Davis, CA) site director, and Laury Fischer, Bay Area Writing Project Teacher-Consultant, led a four-hour session devoted to the Summer Institute. Eighty four people crowded into the space we had reserved to accommodate the small group we expected. People stayed the whole afternoon in spite of the lack of space and cool air. We were thrilled to see so much interest. One site director reported coming away “full of ideas” and planning to “borrow shamelessly from the materials and approaches” shared in the workshop. The live demonstrations of summer institute components such as coaching and debriefing were also well received by both experienced and new site leaders. We plan to continue to offer site-to-site support in this forum.

We originally thought about support for sites as a way to help new or re-generating sites strengthen and expand their programs to serve teachers. For a year or two, as we made new site visits, we called the program Technical Assistance, a title with a nice, official ring to it. Since part of the NWP network’s mission is to build and maintain the overall quality of our work, it seemed to make sense to us to offer support and help from site to site.

Last year almost 30 sites, including new sites, received assistance in various forms: site visits, phone conferences, state network meetings, invitations for site visits, sharing of useful materials, and help with problem solving. One site director reported on her visit as a day that was “only the beginning of an enriched and infinitely more fulfilling relationship... my experience giving technical assistance was excellent and has created a vision of what we could be if we were closer and more open with each other about our needs and problems.”

As we plan site visits for the coming year, we are committed whenever possible to meet with state networks to share resources, to plan strategies for seeking and maintaining state funding, and to work together to help each site in the state to become a force for change.

Even though in our first year the program, particularly the communication part of it, looked a little sketchy, we learned enough to know that we had the beginnings of a useful NWP program. As one site leader said: “These site visits have been delightful and rewarding for me and for our site. I now always touch base with the sites. This network of friends and colleagues is at the core of NWP’s function and of its success...” I urge NWP to continue and expand this wonderful and valuable experience.”

When we reported to the NWP Task Force on the site visits, the notion of technical assistance underwent a metamorphosis to something much closer to a writing project model. At its best, the program would facilitate sharing of successful approaches of sites much in the way that the summer institute is a sharing of successful approaches of teachers. I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me how often we think of a promising development in the project and it turns out to be symmetrical with the original writing project model — teachers teaching teachers, sites helping sites.

So our new concept of Sites Helping Sites is much more global and collaborative on every level. During the 1996 Annual Review, readers collected information about the particular needs and strengths of sites. This year we will be looking for fresh opportunities for Teacher-Consultants and site directors to share their experience and ideas. As we expand our thinking about ways to make the NWP network work for all sites, we welcome your ideas and suggestions about ways to give and receive help. As one director testified in the annual proposal: “The gift of new perspectives, especially those of NWP colleagues, has allowed us to see with new eyes what we do well and to imagine possible ways in which we might change and grow and do better.”

Please share your ideas with us — I look forward to hearing from you.

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