How Teachers Teach Teachers

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Last summer I was invited to a California Writing Project site to talk about "what makes an effective presentation." The good news was that directors and teachers wanted to explore once more the notion of teacher-to-teacher effectiveness. The not-so-good news was that I had agreed to lead the exploration, for the very topic suggested that I would practice whatever I preached. The odds were that the participants would remember not so much what they heard, but what they saw, and what they saw, it turned out, was "nonslick"--a seemingly messy mixture, like their classroom teaching, of informing and being informed, of engaging in activities and reflecting on them, of citing authority and giving over authority. The group felt both relieved and unsettled by the apparent message that teachers teaching teachers probably meant teaching after all, as opposed to a staged presentation. Teaching makes you so much more vulnerable--and responsible--than other slick, noncontact sports.

Over the Project's fourteen-year history, teachers have assumed the risk and the responsibility for teaching their colleagues and, in the process, for creating new models, new and higher standards for staff development workshops. I have watched how they teach, what they do that makes a noticeable difference in the way workshop participants respond to their ideas. And what they do, I believe, deserves our attention and discussion.

First, in effective workshops I've seen, Writing Project teachers are selective in what they teach other teachers: a slice of their classroom practice rather than a parade of all the procedures they know. They resist the temptation to unload the whole of their teaching careers from September to June. Rather, like skillful writers, they find a focus that can be followed with confidence, in this case into other classrooms with other students. Their emphasis is not on how much they can teach in a three-hour workshop, but on how much their colleagues can put into practice.

These selected approaches to the teaching of writing, however, are far from isolated or random. Teacher Consultants describe what they do in the context of their classrooms, in the progression of their teaching and their students' learning. They provide the necessary framework in which a best practice occurs--when in the process of writing, when in the development of a student writer, when in the school day or year. Rebekah Caplan, for example, frames her writing-for-specificity approach by her personal history as a teacher, recalling for workshop participants her fruitless margin inscriptions on student papers: "Give more detail." "Unclear." When these vague notations failed to inspire additional detail and clarity, she looked to her own childhood experiences as a student of the arts, to the daily finger exercises in her piano practice, to the improvisation that always preceded her drama performances. In this context, she developed her daily training program for young writers. In this context--with the understanding that "show not tell" exercises are the opening warm-ups each day in Rebekah's classroom--other teachers can successfully train their students to write with specificity.

Another characteristic of effective Writing Project workshops is attention to theory, to the "why" behind a teaching strategy. The reasons that underlie a successful approach to writing instruction give it conviction and staying power. Here, I can use my own experience as an example of the importance of theory, or more accurately, of the void when theory is omitted. Several years ago I led what seemed to me a lively workshop in my district. The teacher writing was memorable that afternoon,
touching pieces about grandmothers and brothers and lost moments of childhood. The response groups virtually hummed. As we were finishing, still heady from the display of our prose, a young bearded fellow reached under the table and pulled out a hardcover grammar book. "This," he said, now holding the book up for everyone to see, "is a whole lot easier than what you're talking about." He was right, of course. Why, without knowing why, should he entangle himself in clusters and drafts and revisions and all this recursive business? The experience alone, no matter how heady, was not enough.

It is difficult, at best, to change established classroom patterns, to trade in the known for the "trust-me-this-will-work." Teachers need to know why peer response groups, for example, are worth the sacrifice of time and frontline control. Even if teachers are enticed by the initial excitement, they will probably bail out at the first sign of failure in their own classrooms unless they are convinced that the approach at hand merits a not-always-smooth transition.

Without theory, even the best practices can fall into a kind of fashion industry. Teachers, barraged every season by new styles and designs, are free to swap one attractive practice for another. Theory—whether it is personal theory, the theory from research, or the findings from teacher-research—inspires longevity, the chance for a best practice to wear well rather than out.

Writing Project Teacher Consultants have given new definition and credibility to theory itself. Their special knowledge from classroom practice has added to knowledge from research. They bring to Writing Project workshops an informed set of observations and experiences that invite the participants to go beyond mere imitating of a practice to developing their own informed points of view.

The stongest evidence of successful practice that Writing Project teachers can bring to inservice workshops is student models, especially if the papers represent a range of student writers. Teacher Consultant Alice Kawazoe offers a series of drafts from one of her non-native speakers to demonstrate the power of student response, the results of one student helping another to improve his paper.

*Draft 1:* When my brother got shotted I was glad not me. If I got shotted I never come to America to make new country, to make new life, to make new chance. My family used to struggle, so American struggles o.k. with us. But I am sad.

*Draft 2:* The air hot all around even still about 9 at nighttime. No noise hit our ear. Even still the birds are asleping. Only earth noises when it receive our shoes. From moonlit we see the ground and bushes and leafs. No heavy tree yet. But most time at night we try see with are ear to catch danger. My brother is walking in front of me. He move much fast than me, notore leg—just more fast.

His shirt I can see and the back of his leg. His head is too black to see. He turn head to look after me then BOOM. The BOOM and the shock knock me down. I cannot see his shirt again, so crawling to him. The bom clear away leaves. My brother I cannot describe. He not my brother any more. So shock.

When my brother got shotted, I was glad not me. First so sad, then glad. Full of thankfulness I am still living. Then guiltiness for been still alive myself.

If I got shotted I never come to America to make new country, to make new life, to make new chance. My family use to struggles, so American struggles O.K. with us. But still I am sad for my brother not here too.

The poignancy of this student's writing is not the primary reason Alice selects it as a model, for such writing is relatively common among ESL students. She selects it, instead, because it clearly demonstrates how one student, in this case a remedial writer, can be taught to ask the right questions of another to unturn the story that is hidden in the first draft. Workshop participants are bound to know from her student models that Alice has an approach worth examining.

In effective Writing Project workshops, Teacher Consultants are also themselves models of how they teach their students to write. Their workshops go beyond a presentation format. Science teacher and former football coach Bob Tierney once referred in a workshop to his early years of delivering lectures as entertainment for the teacher. His teaching of teachers now reflects an entirely different practice. We are involved, moving together through one of Bob's strategies for writing to learn. He delivers stiff lampreys to our tables, pointing out their obvious smell of formaldehyde. We touch and turn them, talking about what we see. We write and read to each

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other the stuff of our observations, our speculations and questions. Bob circulates, his not-so-white lab coat brushing by us, his nods encouraging us to learn firsthand about lampreys and in the process, about his approach to writing in science. These activities and others like them—writing and responding, close reading of student papers, reacting to problems posed—prepare teachers for the next step, transferring what they've learned into their own classrooms. The writing, in particular, gives participants a chance to step into the shoes of their students, to experience what it is they will ask students to do. No amount of explanation can replace an actual try-out for building confidence or for empowering a teacher to reshape classroom practices.

And no amount of try-out can stand entirely alone. When Writing Project teachers, at the close of an activity, ask their colleagues, "What did you notice...?" "How did you react to...?" "What happened when...?" they are inviting participants to explore together the nuances of an activity, to uncover its extensions and limitations and adaptations. They are inviting reflection, an exchange of authority, a chance for workshop participants to talk through their experiences. With this invitation, participants can give voice to their new or refined points of view. Reflection, then, can be an antidote to dogma, to pat presentations of procedures and to rote following of those procedures. Teachers, both participants and consultants, work together to re-examine premises and the most precious of practices.

Rebekah Caplan, in her book Writers In Training, explains what happens to her own teaching when her colleagues have the opportunity to reflect and question:

At one point in my career as a consultant, I was sure that my four-part training program was foolproof, inviting relatively little challenge. But, I soon found that as I closed the door on one problem, I opened a door to another. My teacher-audience taught me that. I soon realized how crucial it was for me to return to the classroom to rethink and retest my original ideas. I am still defining, then, what I believe to be the writing process and how it should be taught.

And Writing Project teachers like Rebekah are still defining the best ways to teach others about their successful practices. Even now, having described what I have found impressive in Writing Project workshops, I am bound to qualify. No description, no guidelines such as the BAWP Presenters Handbook can encompass the infinite variations in teaching, the humor, the gentleness, the energy, the astute minds that Teacher Consultants bring to their workshops. Nor can a single description accommodate the changes Rebekah notes, the tailoring Teacher Consultants do to find common ground in uncommon situations, the constant questioning of what they're about. We can, however, continue our openness to what works, to our discoveries in teaching at all levels, in classrooms and in workshops with our colleagues. And we can continue to nurture the professionalism that prompted Teacher Consultant Jane Justka, when asked in a workshop what the Writing Project is selling, to answer, "Respect. Can you use some?"

At the close of my most recent summer workshop for the BAWP Open Program, a teacher came forward to shake my hand, saying, "I can't believe how much you've learned since the last time I heard you two years ago." I was amazed that he could see the changes in my teaching—until he explained that he was talking about himself. "I just wasn't ready to hear you until now," he said. We shook hands again. This teaching each other is a humbling business.

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