Who Owns the Writing Project?

June Mitchell said to me once, "I am the only person in my school who has a writing program. And I am the only person in my school who seems not to." There were no worksheets in June's class, no sets of curricular materials through which her students were being marched.

Lou Price told me, "The ways I am now trying to teach writing require a lot more structures in the classroom, not fewer. But these are structures of a different sort. If these structures are working and outsiders just walk by the classroom, they won't see them at all. If the structures are not working, they will see their absence."

Invisible programs and unseen structures. I am a Writing Project Director, and Lou and June are Teacher Consultants. Their comments give me pause. They suggest something about what makes the Writing Project special—and why it needs to last.

How can the Writing Project last? That sobering question draws me into these reflections, which I hope will contribute to a dialogue I know we need. Here the thread that stitches concerns together is "ownership." It is a term many of us have found ourselves using, perhaps in new ways, within the Project. It may also be a key to the Project's lasting.

Ownership certainly is a key to June and Lou. They keep working with different approaches, learning from them with their students. Rather than being owned by curricular materials or yellowed notes, they own their own teaching. In varied ways, they seek to have

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students assume ownership of their own writing, of their own learning. As these two teachers illustrate, ownership is a key to educational quality. Students own learning that lasts, and teachers own the teaching that enables them to keep giving their best. That is a lesson of our Writing Project experience. Ownership does not just happen because we wish it would. That is another lesson.

Within the Writing Project, unseen structures and quiet programs promote ownership. But who owns these structures, these programs? Who owns the Writing Project?

**Teachers Need Project**

Right now outsiders are walking by the nation's classrooms, in physical fact, in local presses, in national reports, in legislation of good intentions. One way or another, the nation seems hell-bent on educational reform. And all this concern, which in some senses is to be welcomed, also puts teachers at risk, none more so than teachers who are or who could become the very best. That includes teachers involved in Writing Project work.

In this time of educational reform, our Writing Project is an educational reform movement; its effectiveness has been acclaimed by the most thoughtful professionals in our country.

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Michael Scriven's judgement remains accurate, I have no doubt: The Writing Project model represents "the best large scale effort to improve composition instruction now in operation in this country." So does John Hale's: "As for the character of the work, I have no hesitation in saying that the National Writing Project has been by far the most effective and 'cost-effective' Project in the history of the [National Endowment for the Humanities] support for elementary and secondary education programs." And Secretary Bennett has recently written, "The model staff development program you have developed, that has universities working together with schools at all levels, merits the support of those who value excellence in education. Your Project gives some of the most dedicated and capable teachers the vital nourishment they need."

Even the best teachers continue to need the Writing Project if they are to withstand well-intended outside pressures. Test scores in writing demonstrate that our work has barely begun. It should surprise no one that most students still write poorly when the paucity of resources is measured against the breadth and the depth of the problem. A nation now calling for excellence in education needs the example of the Writing Project, which helps excellent teaching to be honored within educational institutions and respected in the culture at large.

Two years ago Sheridan Blau asked, "How Long Should The Writing Project Continue?" (NWP Newsletter, April, 1985). His implicit answer was "Indefinitely," to which I would add "Amen." As he points out, many of us began Writing Project work believing that this would be "a fixer-up program for composition teachers" which in a few years could quietly fade away, its work done. The lessons we have learned since then—including the ones of ownership—have called that early view into question, and most of us realize how limited our original vision was. But merely wishing or saying that the Writing Project should continue will not insure that it does, any more than wishes will guarantee student ownership of learning in a classroom.

What are the lessons of ownership within the Writing Project? What are their implications for ownership of the Writing Project?

**Ownership, Not Packaging**

We might well begin by soberly acknowledging just how different this educational movement really is. Mary K. Healy ("Beating the 'Writing Systems' on Our Own Ground," NWP/CSW Quarterly, January 1987) suggests a key difference. We don't have a "writing system." There is no product that we can sell and for that matter no particular writing process either. Despite the languages we sometimes use, we do not really "train" teachers ("Animals are trained;
persons grow," I've heard teachers comment), and there is no clearly defined pedagogy which we promote. Like June Mitchell's classroom, we seem not to have a writing program. Wisely and deliberately, we are a movement without some single, articulated program. But such an orientation tends not to compute easily, in a climate where concerns are faddish, where identity and legitimacy are conferred on assured solutions neatly packaged.

We don't package a pedagogy. We do promote ownership.

"I now own my..." becomes a natural marking of the new orientation, the sea-change in attitude, that we discover for ourselves within the Project. Ownership does not just happen. It grows from commonalities of interest, yes, but also, it seems to me, from differences of perspective. In the structurings of a Summer Institute--selecting Fellows, forming writing groups, pacing presentations, in all the varied rhythms of a summer's activities--it seems to me that we bring differences together, not to "cancel" them but so that through them we might inform and enrich each other. Differences seem essential--differences of grade level, experience, educational philosophy. The structurings that encourage ownership are as invisible and as important as those of Lou Price's class. "In the Writing Project, all you people do is drink coffee and laugh," one professor has commented. The ownership that marks our new directions may require the coffee; it also requires our differences.

It requires our investment, too. Within a Writing Project we begin to own our own writing as we invest ourselves in it. Frequently what enables us to make that investment is our making our writing accessible to each other--its agonies, its satisfactions, its emerging shapes--and thereby making the processes of our writing more understandable to ourselves. Likewise ownership of learning: each of us invests energy in it, but your idea (or question, or uncertainty), plus mine, equals more than two. The whole of our learning keeps being more than the sum of its parts. Our writing and our learning show it: our investments are crucial, but what allows them to bring such rich returns is that they are not proprietary.

There are some things that we own more deeply when we give them away. "Ownership" accurately marks our re-orientation within a Writing Project, but the term comes to include openness to other perspectives and cooperation with other people.

Developing Ownership

I have always thought that the Writing Project is first owned by the teachers who comprise it. But it is far easier merely to say that than it is to develop means that might make it so. As with most sites I am sure, teachers in ours do end the summer with ownership of that Institute. An early sign is the marvelous difficulty I have in getting the group's attention; a later sign is their making plans--for everything from t-shirts to get-togethers to classroom strategies--without even consulting me or other Project directors. It doesn't just happen, but teachers do come to own their Summer Institutes.

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We teachers deserve and need this initial bonding with each other in that Institute group. But beyond that first summer, what invisible structures enable our new-found energy not to be an end in itself, but a source that carries us to continuing support and growth? We need that also as we return to school environments which, once familiar, can now seem alien.

For a Writing Project to last--and, I suspect, for the changes to last which have been begun in the Project--teachers need to become part of something broader than their initial Institute.

The bonding with Fellows of their own Institute can be so strong that even their identification with those from other summers becomes a problem. Continuity meetings can help, though our site experimented with a number of ineffective formats before arriving at one (an annual midwinter reunion day) that functions effectively. So can newsletters, though even the best teachers require quiet but strong networking before they can permit themselves to submit short articles.

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Follow-up Institutes can be offered, though scheduling and registration can become difficult issues, and no one should expect from them the same emotional returns that are typical in the initial Institute.

From eight years of trial (and error) in our own site, I think two principles emerge: (1) It is crucial to create and seriously attend to internal structures of a Writing Project site. (2) It is crucial that teachers be nurtured to assume leadership roles within those structures. (Our site, for example, now has an Executive Board, elected by the membership, which helps plan Project activities, and each summer since 1985 a different Teacher Consultant has been co-director of the Summer Institute.) If a Writing Project site has little more internal structure than a summer school course, then that site will tend to become only a summer school course. These "internal structures" work best by working silently, calling no more attention to themselves than a building's foundation does; they will be largely invisible to anyone outside the Project. But such structures and the dynamics they enable are essential to the health and ownership of a Project site.

A site can be strengthened also by structures across sites but internal to the Writing Project. The new regional directorships should promote state- and region-wide networking of various sorts; that will offer new vitality to individual sites partly by helping teachers of a site see their membership in a much wider community. Collaboration between the National Writing Project and the new Center for the Study of Writing will help remind us all of the strengths of collaborative ownership. The NWP sponsorship campaign should be another such reminder. It is an opportunity for teachers and institutions to demonstrate their ownership, and to remain active constituents of the Project. We need each other as an active constituency every bit as much as the lead agency needs financial support.

Ownership by teachers deepens and extends in the same ways that effective structures evolve—in response to needs and interests. What called Writing Projects into being in the first place was a need which persists for large numbers of teachers to bring about lasting change in their classrooms. The need is for strong, effective programs of in-service education. Probably we have all seen Teacher Consultants whose ties to the Writing Project have continued to deepen and whose professional lives have continued to grow as they engaged in in-service work with other teachers.

A Cautionary Tale

Writing Projects have earned an enviable reputation for programs of effective in-service. But for years now, our site has had few such contracts. What happened?

I think these dynamics are at work: Like outsiders walking past Lou Price's class, administrators directly monitoring an in-service program, as well as the teachers attending it, tended not to see the underlying structures at work. What they saw was a series of fine presentations by individual Teacher Consultants, not the coordinated effort of a larger, sustaining Writing Project. Second, administrators had a number of disincentives to seeing more deeply. Rather than calling on the Writing Project for more in-service, logistically and economically it must have seemed more expedient to call on individual Teacher Consultants. Many of them, after all, were already employees of the requesting districts. There is a political expedience at work also. The very excellence of Writing Project in-service easily can threaten administrators whose job is to provide effective in-service.

Several years ago the superintendent of a major school system, who had been the principal support of our Writing Project site from the beginning, decided that his district should have one of the most massive, ambitious, and promising in-service programs I have heard of anywhere. Writing Project Teacher Consultants had been doing extensive in-service in his district from the beginning, but there were virtually no explicit links between this work and the Writing Project. The superintendent's perception was that the Writing Project, while highly effective, was reaching only the 25 or so teachers of each summer's Invitational Institute and he knew that something far larger was needed.

The resulting "Writing Cooperative" between that school district and this university has been in place for two years now and by virtually all "counts" it has been a striking success. It released six UNCC professors last year to work part-time in schools while two Teacher

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Consultants came to the university. It has placed cross-disciplinary writing teams of teachers in each of more than one hundred school buildings. In Summer Institutes for these team members, it has generated hours of graduate credit well into the thousands. These Institutes have been staffed exclusively by Teacher Consultants of the UNCC Writing Project.

In fact, this program could not have existed without the Writing Project. But the success story has a sobering side. No connection is officially acknowledged between this Cooperative and the Writing Project. University and school system administrators, who have assumed credit for the Cooperative and control of its quarter-million dollar annual budget, determined that. The resulting divisions make it all the more difficult for the Writing Project to function as it should, as a shared resource which offers continuing nourishment for Teacher Consultants and others.

Teachers need to feel a continually deepening ownership of a Writing Project. That is crucial to their professional growth and to the Project's lasting health. Their ownership is initiated in Invitational Institutes. It can be fostered through appropriate structures internal to the Project and through continuing Project activities and meetings. But these can become more nearly obligations than opportunities unless there is some identification between in-service efforts and the Writing Project itself.

Furthermore, without some such identification, many officials will see little apparent reason for a Writing Project to grow or even to continue to exist. Despite all that a Writing Project makes possible, it can come to be seen as an expensive luxury, reaching only a few select teachers. That perception is not accurate or healthy for those within a Writing Project or for those whom it might serve.

Institutional Ownership

Teacher ownership is crucial; it is a prime source of the energy and insight that a Writing Project offers. But I have come to see that institutional ownership is equally essential if a Writing Project is to last.

The Writing Project began as a matter of collaborative ownership between institutions. Much as teachers in a Summer Institute bring their varying perspectives to bear on issues of common concern, a university and neighboring school systems invested resources toward a common end, in the process often learning new lessons of healthy cooperation. At the national level as well, the Writing Project was a joint enterprise of BAWP and the National Endowment for the Humanities, as BAWP disseminated NEH funds for local site development and provided both guidance for those sites and reminders of Writing Project philosophy that local administrators sometimes needed.

Institutional attitudes and structures often accompany patterns of funding. ("Unless something costs money, it's probably not much of a priority anyway," my dean accurately says.) The funds which furrowed Writing Project channels in the early days now largely are history, and some institutional commitments have not withstood their passing. Our Writing Project bears the name of the university which hosts it, but to this day the UNCC Writing Project does not have any regular allocated budget from the institution; even the institutional sponsorship of the National Writing Project has had to come from within Project resources.

All site directors are familiar with such financial frustrations, but my point extends a good deal deeper. Without continuing commitment of resources to a Writing Project, institutions will feel little ownership of the Project. And, like the ownership by Project teachers, ownership by cooperating institutions is crucial to the Writing Project's lasting health. The UNCC Writing Project appears nowhere in the university's Table of Organization. Reports we have written (or have commissioned by observers from outside) and have sent through university channels have been greeted with silence. No one locally requests or receives copies of the ones we write annually to Berkeley. Project accomplishments do not find their way into the reports of any university officials. Officially, except when the university wishes publicly to list programs that are working well, the UNCC Writing Project does not exist.
In some ways, ours has been an enviable position. Our site is largely freed of the bureaucratic constraints within which departments and agencies must work, and I think we have been good stewards of that freedom. There have been Writing Project-sponsored seminars for university faculty, three-day writing retreats at Wildacres (six of them so far) and year-length faculty writing groups, through which professors have begun to rethink classroom practices and have published what they otherwise would not have written. There is no question that the Project has contributed significantly to the health of the university. The problem is that if a program is not in some senses answerable to an institution, then the institution will feel little ownership of that program. And to a Writing Project that might last, collaborative ownership is crucial. Institutions too must share that ownership.

In the UNCC Writing Project we are still trying to foster some sense of institutional ownership, partly through sponsoring a variety of activities for faculty. We just now also are asking that a cross-disciplinary faculty committee assume some oversight of future Writing Project programs. With support from our administration, we are working to create for the Writing Project a blue-ribbon advisory committee of civic leaders. We hope that if leaders outside the university feel some ownership of the Writing Project, then leaders within the institution may be encouraged to develop similar attitudes.

Ownership Redefined

Ownership begins with the grass-roots; that is a special lesson the Writing Project lets us learn. But if ownership ends there, the Writing Project probably will end there also, cast into the furnaces that consume educational ideas. That need not happen if ours is an ownership redefined, one not of exclusivity but of differences and of collaborative investments. Those of us who claim ownership continue to need what the Writing Project enables us to achieve. So do the institutions in which we work.

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The Site Director's Role

What of a site director's role in all this? As a director of our own site, there is so much that I need to be doing, so much more than I am doing. Yet I already am doing as much as anyone could reasonably be expected to do. That is not intended as boast or complaint; as with many of us, it is simple, sobering fact.

It is also part of the problem. As a founder and director of a site, I have never regretted my Writing Project investment. Through it I have kept finding new life in the classes I teach, the university has granted me advancements, and the work has contributed more to educational improvement than anything else I might have been doing.

But a Writing Project and its site director can become too closely bound up with each other for the long-term health of either. A Writing Project's identification with any one individual eventually contributes to unhealthy dependences within the Project and suspicions beyond it, making it all the more difficult to develop the sorts of structures a lasting Project needs. So while I am a site director, the Writing Project is not something I possess. I do not wish it to be and it cannot be if it is to last.