REMARKS FOR A WORKSHOP

This piece was written as introductory remarks for a workshop conducted by Lee Davis and Sylvia Velasco for the Central California Writing Project. It is reprinted, with the author’s permission, from the Central California Writing Project Newsletter.

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There are at least two dangers in a workshop such as this one. First, as workshop presenters, we may fall into the trap of becoming so involved in what we have to say, sharing what we think we have learned, that we won’t listen to you and recognize that your experiences are as valuable and revealing as our own. Second, there is the possibility that you may fall into the trap of thinking we have some unshakable truths, some great understandings, that we will hand over to you in the next few hours. I don’t mean to say we don’t have an agenda, or that we are so humble we won’t offer advice. However, I want to state right at the beginning of our workshop that we believe the most effective learning takes place through interaction, when people risk expressing their ideas.

We are not here looking for customers, but rather for collaborators. We are seeking to involve more and more educators in the discourse surrounding school reform. We do not come with a packaged curriculum that ignores the individual needs of students or neglects to encourage professionals’ needs to consult with one another. We come as teachers who have been working with other educators, trying to improve our teaching. One of the most significant things we have learned about improving our teaching, and therefore our schools, is that we, the teachers, are our greatest resource. We need opportunities, like this morning, when teachers are not exhausted, or do not have to choose between several tasks left undone, to talk with and listen to one another.

The Writing Project, now replicated at twenty-one sites in California and more than one hundred sites around the nation, attributes its success as a staff development model to three basic tenets: The best teachers of other teachers are successful classroom teachers. These teachers can and should come from all levels and disciplines. By examining the current research on the teaching of writing, we can be stimulated not only to try new ideas, but also to rethink, or re-evaluate, our past writing experiences.

Teachers of writing need to be writers themselves. Otherwise, it is akin to asking someone who doesn’t play the guitar to teach it by talking about which strings to pluck. I want to come back to this because, like me, some of you may be reluctant writers.

The backbone of the Writing Projects is a Summer Institute. Kindergarten through college teachers, from different disciplines, share their successes and problems in teaching writing. These teachers do a good deal of writing and respond to one another’s writing in small groups. They review what others have written and discuss its relevance, or the lack of it, with their colleagues. No one has to sign an affidavit at the end of the institute stipulating he or she will teach writing in a certain way. Nor are there attempts to gain total agreement in the group.

A common Writing Project anecdote concerns the teacher who says, “We have done the Writing Project. We have done all the writing activities.”

In fact, the opposite is true. Participants are encouraged to identify and discuss their areas of disagreement. Our experience has shown that many of us benefit from speaking clearly with, and listening carefully to, those with whom we disagree. The end goal of this communication is to revise our thinking and, of course, our writing. Such revision prompts new insights, and the development of more and better arguments to guide and defend our classroom practices.

The Writing Projects have become large enough, and have been around long enough, that Writing Project enthusiasts seek each other’s company to tell Writing Project anecdotes. These anecdotes are similar to those told in the faculty room: A
student tips over the bookcase in your classroom, bumping and activating the fire extinguisher, sending kids into hysterical orbits, while you try to mop the floor with paper towels (that happened to me). It’s either tell someone or sit down and cry. A common Writing Project anecdote concerns the teacher who says, “We have done the Writing Project. We have done all the writing activities.” The reason this story is told so frequently is not to make fun of its originator. It is to try to figure out better ways to present what we have learned. It points to the difficulty in trying to communicate a theory or theories of writing while also offering examples of how these theories are translated into practice.

As presenters today, we realize that if you don’t get something you can use in your classroom tomorrow, then for many of you, today will not prove to be a good use of your time. Yet we hope you leave this workshop with more than a few ideas for classroom writing. We hope you will confirm or initiate a resolve: to have your students write often and to share their writing with each other, to talk frequently with your colleagues about the teaching of writing, and to write often yourselves.

Why write? This question has been asked over and over again. I think it is important for each of us, as teachers of writing, to try to answer it. Writing can be much more than recording the ideas of others. It can be much more than the World Book reports, which students resist writing and we regret reading. Writing can help us discover ourselves, our community, and our world. We can use writing to find out what we already know and what we would like to learn. Writing aids us in making meaning of confusing and frustrating events in our lives. It can help us get to know one another; it provides an effective way to work together as we seek solutions to the problems we share. These reasons could be sorted into the following interrelated groups: writing to think, writing to develop a healthy image of oneself, and writing for citizenship. There are no doubt many more.

Why are so many of us reluctant writers? Why do we rarely submit articles to school newsletters, newspapers, and professional publications? Is it because there just isn’t enough time, that so many other things have priority? Is it that we don’t have the confidence that we can express on paper what we really think? Is it a lack of faith that anyone will want to read our words, or the fear that our style and mechanics will be unduly criticized? Perhaps there is the nagging thought that someone else has already written what we want to say, and expressed it better.

I am familiar with all of these reasons not to write and am pleased to share with you one of the most important things I have gained from my involvement with the Central California Writing Project. This new paradigm or model, referred to as “process-centered writing,” works for us reluctant writers. It works to daydream, read, talk, and write spontaneously in order to carve out a topic. It works to write continuously, without stopping to correct errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax, then to reread and see if what has been committed to paper is worth the time to edit. It works for me to ask others to read what I have written. What is it they don’t understand, disagree with, or have no interest in? I can use or refuse their comments. However, these comments will assist me in anticipating my audience (who I’m writing for) and in clarifying my purpose (why I’m writing). It works to revise writing: to add, delete, move sentences and paragraphs around. In short, to rethink what is important and the best way to say it. And, if I’ve come this far and want to continue, I welcome, rather than resist, the opportunity to manicure and polish my writing, and to dig into Strunk and White’s Elements of Style, to figure out the proper usage for which and that.

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How do I know this “writing process” works? I’m not as reluctant to write now. I notice some small progress in my ability to communicate. I no longer have the same intense fear of committing my thoughts to paper. I begin to experience writing, when it sparks collaboration, as a vehicle for school reform.

We need to improve the teaching of writing so that students’ writing will improve. We also need to improve the teaching of writing so teachers’ writing will improve. The Writing Project is committed to both.

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