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METHODS AND A WILD SURMISE

When I attended college, the 19th century was out. English professors and majors, up on the literary fads, knew that 19th century literature was boring and not relevant to our concerns. T.S. Eliot was. Figuring him out, or trying to, was the proper occupation for an English major, especially one fashionably interested in modern poetry. When I went to graduate school, twenty years later, that had all changed. The 19th century writers were now taken very seriously and had much to say to us all. T.S. Eliot, on the other hand, was slipping. Everybody understood him.

Each year my students discover anthropomorphism. They think it’s wonderfully poetic and neat to give their rocks and flowers feelings. I don’t. I have learned to read poetry during a time when that kind of imagery is in disrepute. The judgments I make on my students’ writing are subject both to fads in literary stylishness and to my own taste and literary background.

When I read students’ first love poems with sunset-at-the-beach settings, I groan because it is nearly impossible to write on that subject in that setting with any freshness. Yet I cannot fairly look down on their discoveries. “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” that odd sonnet, is one of my favorites because it celebrates not the first time, but the first time for each individual and the sacredness and excitement of that moment. Not spoiling that moment while simultaneously offering the chance to learn more out of the past and into the future—that is what education is about.

It takes time to learn what has staying power, what is excellent, and for teachers the problem is
acute. During my teaching career many new programs have come and gone, all of which would, it was hoped, improve the learning and teaching of students and teachers. Some programs I have been enthusiastic about; others, not so.

To complicate matters further, there is no way to know which things we do with our students that turn them into lifelong learners, readers, and writers—and which are ineffective. Test scores, grades, and professional and personal success, generally accepted as evidence, are subject to many variables other than teaching. Even if all my former students wrote thank you notes to me from their death beds, I still would be suspicious. They may have mixed up the causes or confused the effects.

Despite this lack of adequate evaluation measures, the history of efforts to make teaching and learning more effective is a history of methods. Do this. Don't do that because it is old fashioned or too innovative and untested. Teachers and their students have felt at the mercy of each new method to come along.

Recently I have read and been told that Writing Projects have a method of teaching writing. One assures me that Writing Project teachers don't teach grammar. Another says that we all use free writing. Still another believes that central to the method are small groups discussing each other's writing. We all believe in process, don't we? Writing Projects are said to be about creative writing, whatever that is, but not about expository writing, whatever that is.

I can understand why people discuss Writing Projects. As a series of teaching methods, what else could a staff development effort be about? But to me that idea is as inappropriate as preparing a handout entitled "The Writing Process" as if there were only one and this is it. The Writing Project is about something more important than method, more revolutionary and thus less easy to accept by teachers or by those who teach them and do research on their activities.

The Writing Project says to me that I am a thinking, caring professional. It is my responsibility to know my students and their differences and to understand their psychology. It is my responsibility to read and study the ideas of other teachers and the research in my field, and to judge fairly and accurately their usefulness to my teaching. It is also my responsibility to communicate my ideas and discoveries to others, to share my methods with other teachers, writing about what I know, publishing and giving presentations.

I do not mean that any way of teaching writing is as good as any other, nor do I agree that any method is fine so long as it's used by good-hearted teachers. I have been in presentations given by Writing Project teachers and heard methods of teaching writing described that I would never use because I believe they are wrong. My responsibility in such situations, however, is to keep my mind open during the presentation and to rethink my teaching.

The message the Writing Project has given me is to listen with respect to other teachers whatever their views and to listen with equal respect to the teacher next door to me as to a national figure. By placing value on the work of my colleagues, I learned to value my own work as well.

I am not the same teacher I was when I began my association with the Writing Project. I teach differently, use different methods. Each year I try new methods, discard others. My first Writing Project presentation has changed many times, I hope for the better. But that first presentation was my first look into Chapman's Homer and no less important because I had a lot yet to learn.

Teachers always have a lot to learn or they are not really teaching. They do not get better and then stop learning. That is why giving presentations is such an important part of any Writing Project Institute and why teachers should not be told to wait until they really know something before they give presentations. If that were true, we would have to bring all education to a screeching halt.

When I give a presentation I no longer desire to make everyone within my hearing an instant convert to my methods, to put on a show for applause. What I hope for is that the teachers with whom I am working will participate in a teacher-to-teacher exchange or mutual respect. I know that the key to a good presentation is respect for the teachers who are present, them and me.

The Writing Project is a staff development model, loose and grass roots. At its best it is a group of teachers who wish to become better at what they do and are taking the responsibility for their own learning. What's unusual about the model is that it requires a confidence and trust in teachers that is not in the American heritage of teacher preparation or staff development, the assumption that at any given moment, teachers are responsibly practicing what they know, however widely divergent their methods and that we all greet new learning with eagerness and delight, "a wild surprise."

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