WE’RE NOT ALONE

I read draft three of this article to my college non-fiction writing class . . . I mean a real draft three—many changes from draft to draft to draft. But when I heard it with their ears, it was stuffy. One student said, “It’s the kind of writing you’re teaching us not to do.” I should have known. It’s usual for me to take my subject so seriously about the third draft. Only after I get my ideas squared away do I add the images, metaphors, and anecdotes as if I were landscaping the property after I moved into the house.

In that class we learn to write and write to learn. We keep learning logs to uncover our discoveries, our questions, our problems—you name it. After each class the students put their current log entries into their folders, I read them, and return them to the next class. It’s like a recycling plan in full swing. After this particular class their logs had a common theme—they were relieved to see that they weren’t the only ones struggling with their writings. Watching me sweat, once again, made us all writers and diminished our differences. Writing is difficult for all of us. It also added to our sense of responsibility; no one could goldbrick because his back hurt. We are all in this thing together.

As Teacher/Consultants and Directors, we too periodically feel alone—and for good reason. We’re at the forefront of changes that are occurring in inservice teaching, in the teaching of writing, and in writing itself. Take, for instance, the shift in student writing over the last ten years.

In the previous top-down model, the students wrote in studentese only for the teacher, for the purpose of evaluation, on a topic selected by the teacher, and in the form of the five paragraph essay. In the emerging cooperative model students are writing in their own voices (and often a variety of voices), to many different audiences, on topics they have selected, and in a variety of forms. The 19th century categories of narration, description, argumentation, and persuasion are being replaced by process terms: drafts, revisions, purpose, audience, and response groups. Furthermore, students are not only learning to write, but writing to learn.

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In a larger sense, the top-down model did not allow students to work together on their writings—it was considered plagiarism to do so. In addition, writing was only school writing, and academic prose was our prime model of good writing. Now, we are looking at the writing processes of professional writers, “real” writers. Students are becoming reluctant to submit first drafts as final drafts, and they now consider part of the assignment to provide time for revision.

I think we’ve proven that writing can be taught and that children of all ages have much to say. The countless course publications attest to this. Teachers are teaching as much by listening as by talking, and knowledge is no longer considered the property of the teacher or the test, but is, in Mary K. Healy’s phrase, “in the room.” Teachers, by writing along with their students, are instructing by learning. In addition, educational researchers are no longer college professors but are also the classroom teachers observing their students as only they can, and writing their findings for other classroom teachers to read.

The Project is in the business of inservice education, and it well may be the best at it in education. But we are not alone. The concepts which are so successful in this new model of inservice education are cropping up in other occupations and in other parts of society. Some believe that these fundamentally new ideas developing in the later 20th century constitute a paradigm shift (in Thomas Kuhn’s words), i.e., the replacing of one conceptual model with another. Whether this is true or not, and whether or not “paradigm shift” is an adequate explanation of current change, we definitely are seeing major shifts in the underlying assumptions not only of inservice education and writing instruction, but also of business, government, industry, agriculture, and many other fields. One tenet of the NWP model, for instance, is cooperation. Let me quote NWP assumptions One and Four:

One: The writing problem affects both the universities and the schools. This common problem can best be solved through cooperatively planned university-school programs.

Four: Programs designed to improve the teaching of writing should involve teachers at all grade levels and from all subject areas.

You can see instances of this spirit of cooperation cropping up in:

industry—workers being given more autonomy, more power to decide how a task is to be completed;

medicine—individuals are increasingly looking after themselves, seeking the expertise of knowledgeable people to establish preventive medicine programs;

business—small teams of employees from diverse departments are being brought together for brief periods to solve common problems.

We can see examples of the project assumptions appearing in society at large—such as decentralized governance, instruction by peers, and respect for intuition as a “productive guide for field based research.” But there is one change coming from technology which is affecting both the Project and education: we are shifting from an industrial age to an information age. This advance in technology is joining with advance in our understanding of human behavior. Some students are realizing that teachers and libraries are not the only sources of information. They are discovering that information is within them, and that personal perception, problem solving, and reflection are crucial in this era which values the generalist who can adapt as much as the specialist who can explain clearly. They also know that their personal journals are just as essential to the information age as the computer.

What does this mean for our younger students? They are at the beginning of this shift, and they are adapting very quickly. They are seeing that authority is shared in this new world and that assignments are not just handed down but are handed around and negotiated, especially when they are productive for the instructor or the learner. They are beginning to see that they no longer can blame the instructor or the school for their ignorance. They own their learning and they are proud of it.

Continuation of trend shifts are not inevitable. History does not march forward, it staggers. Because the NWP has had a head start in education, we may have more responsibility for its evolution. Obviously, our first priority is formal education—public and private schools. But as we grow in numbers and expertise, we become ready to work with “educators” in all walks of life—people in business, government, industry, science, and in the home. We have a great deal to offer them when we teach writing through the National Writing Project philosophy, and we have just as much to learn.

For an organization which has the most successful model of inservice education, we have had a glorious beginning—but we have a long, long way to go. Fortunately, our hope of longevity also lies in the model. Have you noticed that none of us has burned out since we became part of the Project? We are a community of learners who know how to learn, support, and nourish each other, as well as those we work with. There is knowledge in the room, and the room extends to all of us.

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