LEARNING LOGS: 
A REDISCOVERY AND AN APPLICATION

Learning logs? Of course. What's new here, you might well be asking. Certainly the idea of writing in a learning log to discover, to reformulate for oneself as well as to communicate with others is one of the basic tenets of Writing Project practice. For years we've been familiar with the rich examples of expressive writing in the body of work done by James Britton, Nancy Martin, Pat D'Arcy and the others involved with the Writing Research Unit at the London Institute of Education in the 70's. More recently we've had Toby Fulwiler's "Journals Across the Disciplines," Ann Berthoff's dialectical notebooks, Anne Wotringer's think-writing, Sondra Perl's writing process notebooks, and the myriad other applications in the classroom of the basic idea that the process of writing is a powerful means of discovery for the writer. So, nothing new here.

However, I would like to report a recent development in BAWP school district workshops—the regular keeping of learning logs by inservice participants and the response to these by the BAWP series coordinators. While many Writing Project teachers have used learning logs in their classes for years, and have introduced them as part of their inservice presentations, we had not, until recently, required them as part of our five and ten session workshops in the schools.

Over the past five years at BAWP, I have held semi-annual meetings with the teachers who coordinate our inservice series. Among other things, these meetings have produced, with the aid of the BAWP Steering Committee, a continually-revised Coordinator's Handbook, in which we explain all the elements which go into the making of successful inservice series. These elements may be as mundane as the quality of the food provided and as vital as the necessity to increase the amount of writing participants do during each session.

Out of these coordinator's meetings, then, came the decision to incorporate learning logs in the school-district series. We made the decision with trepidation; we knew that responding to the logs would add to the weekly load of papers faced by most of our teacher-coordinators. But we decided on a trial year—1982-1983—after which we would reassess the practice.

The responses from BAWP coordinators were almost uniformly favorable. They reported some or all of the following results:

1. The coordinators better understood the participants’ teaching situation. Through the written dialogue in the log, the participants and the coordinators discussed specific problems in

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teaching writing and, given the time-span of the series, could discuss results of new teaching methods. A brief example of this dialogue follows:

Participant: "I'm still very impressed; the speakers are so well prepared! This session was extremely interesting because of clustering and mapping which were new to me. I even checked out Owen Boyle and M.H. Buckley's book on mapping. . . . I am going to try mapping with my 8th grade boys who have just returned from a week-long camping trip. They were told before they left they would have to write a short, descriptive paragraph in French about their experience. (Of course, you can imagine the moans I heard!) Well, I'm thinking that mapping, getting some vocab. on the board, and discussing in French as much as possible are going to give me quality work and give them a positive attitude to tackle the awesome process of writing in French with a limited vocab. and structure base."

Coordinator's Comment: "This [the mapping] will help them see that the assignment is possible to do. It will also provide models, ideas, and expanded vocabulary. Why not show me some examples next time?"

THE NEXT WEEK:

Participant: "As far as my 8th graders doing mapping last week—they did it fairly well! I asked that the final drafts be a dialogue (in the present tense). I just received them (the maps) today—haven't looked at them yet. The boys did seem to be enthusiastic and did share in groups of four. I'm also asking them to recite, with a partner, their dialogues after they get them back and make corrections. Haven't read the mapping book yet—no time."

THE FOLLOWING WEEK:

Participant: "To fill you in—French assignment (dialogues) were better than they had ever been. I was pleased. The students were pleased. If I find a volunteer, I'll have him translate his paper into English for you. They (the papers) were quite basic but also made the students reach back into their previous knowledge and not just depend on the dictionary for "new" words. They build vocabulary around a topic."

2. The logs provided more specifically helpful evaluation for each presenter than that of the previously-used numerical rating sheet. Many coordinators xeroxed the log comments on a given presentation and sent them to the presenter. The following eloquent response is a fine example of James Britton's "shaping at the point of utterance":

"I'm sitting on the subway on my way to your workshop, trying to gather my thoughts, impressions, from our session yesterday. From the time I returned home last night to now I have been caught up in a whirlwind of family life, leaving no time or space to digest, sort, reflect over, your inspiring workshop. What did I learn? What was important to me? A reconfirmation that when dealing with students, as you dealt with us yesterday, one must always have a positive, encouraging approach—make them feel that what they have to say is important and unique. This releases fears, inhibitions, brings them closer to the creative sources within themselves. That writing is only meaningful—or is most meaningful—when the student feels personally engaged, when what we are doing feels relevant. No disembodied prose. The personal voice. So many teachers intimidate instead of nurture. 'We who write are survivors.' (Tillie Olsen) So many crippling forces in life that suppress, thwart the writing process. I want (as you so beautifully illustrated yesterday) to make students realize the rich resources they carry within them. There is so much unwritten that needs to be written. Always encourage. Always inspire students to feel that they can do more than they think they can. It does not matter if what emerges at first is not great. It is a beginning."
"Whether that is literature, or whether that is not literature, I will not presume to say, but that it explains much, and tells much, that is certain.‘ (Virginia Woolf)"

3. The logs enabled the coordinators to model a type of response to student writing quite different in kind from that of the typical correction/evaluation still practiced by many teachers. The exchange below illustrates one participant’s reaction to the response from her coordinator:

Participant: Today was my first day. ______ talked so enthusiastically about it that I decided to join, too. I’m so glad I did!

"______’s presentation was so inspiring and stimulating. I’m just in a phase where I’m bored with the way I’ve been running my class and am in the process of reorganizing and restructuring my program. She has given me so many exciting, great ideas of methods and activities. Also she has reaffirmed my philosophies and has said that what I’ve wanted to do is O.K. and even better than the traditional, teacher’s manual methods.

"I can’t wait to try out these ideas. I’m going to school early tomorrow and raid our library. I only wish I had come last week too!"

Coordinator’s Reply: "What a wonderful entry. I’m delighted you joined us too. Please write and let me know what you try of ______’s in your class and how it goes. Did you really raid the library? Were many of the books there? Of the two Graves’ articles you requested, one’s missing (it must be a good one!) and the other is signed out, but you’re next on the list."

Participant’s Next Entry: "Thanks for the comments. I’m so surprised and pleased that you took the time to respond in writing so fully. Is this what I should be doing with my kids’ writing too?

"Yes, I did raid our library. Unfortunately, it’s not the greatest, and I did not find too many of the books, but I think I can use the ones I did find.

"I was a little confused with today’s presentation on mapping. I’m having trouble figuring out how this can be applied to the primary grades.

"I felt really bad that I couldn’t produce a fable. I wrote something, but I don’t think it would qualify as a fable.

"I was so excited about last week’s presentation that I talked two more teachers from my school to participate. I hope they don’t think I was over-reacting."

Coordinator’s Reply: "Yes, in these logs I am modeling what you might do with learning logs in your class. I’m not suggesting that you respond to all student writing this way. But learning logs are extraordinarily helpful. They are a way to find out what students are learning and a chance for them to have a written dialogue with you in which you are not the critical teacher, just a friend.

"Thank you for your comments about ______. I too would like some models of mapping using primary materials. I’ll pass that on. If we have time, I’ll have the group discuss mapping. Many felt they could use it right away and others were a little befuddled, so a discussion might help. Let me know what you think.

"I couldn’t write a fable either; you make me feel better! Something else to discuss.

"If you get a chance, you might write me about what you do with writing in your class.

"P.S. If you try learning logs, your responses can be much shorter than mine. I get carried away when teachers write me as you have."

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Learning Log Procedures

Most coordinators purchased university exam blue books, convenient because they were small and portable and seemed the right length for a ten-week series. Distributing them to the participants at the end of the first session, the coordinators asked the participants to write for ten minutes introducing themselves, describing their teaching situations, and raising problems or questions that they hoped would be covered during the series. They collected them as the participants left, wrote a response to each participant, and returned the logs at the beginning of the second session. The coordinators continued with this procedure during each of the sessions, cautioning each presenter that he or she must allow time for log-writing within the scheduled time for the workshop.

Many coordinators read pertinent excerpts from the logs at the beginning of subsequent sessions or asked participants to read their own aloud. This ten or fifteen minute recapitulation provided an excellent bridge between sessions, and also helped build a sense of community in the group. In addition, hearing others’ log entries broadened the range of what was "permissible" for those teachers unaccustomed to writing expressively.

Soon the pattern was well established: the week’s presenter would end ten minutes before breaking-up time and log writing would begin. In workshops that I have coordinated, I found it helpful to stand outside the room during log-writing time so I could talk with participants as they handed me their logs without disturbing the writers still at work. Some BAWP coordinators chose to have the logs written at home in the week between the sessions; I preferred the immediacy of the writing right after the session which gave me the chance to respond before too much time had gone by.

Thus, learning logs proved to be as valuable in the inservice sessions as they are in the classrooms. Through their log writing, the teacher-participants could raise issues and specific questions, respond critically to the presentations, and generally work out their new ideas about the teaching of writing. Because this type of writing proved to be both functional and rewarding for them, the teachers seemed eager to begin a similar written exchange with their own students, thus fulfilling that basic Writing Project belief that it’s through one’s own involvement in writing that discoveries about teaching writing are made.

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