"It’s too theoretical—it doesn’t help me Monday morning. Give me something practical." This is one of the charges that used to be levied against inservice education, but we don’t hear it after Writing Project inservice. The Project model de-emphasizes theory and focuses on activities we perform ourselves, writing assignments and strategies we can pass along to our students. But that doesn’t mean that theory has been ignored or discarded. Those who have changed a major assignment have often remarked that it forced them to change many other assignments as well. Just as there is a ripple effect in Project inservice, there is a ripple effect in the classroom. Without expressing it in theoretical terms, teachers work to achieve a theoretical consistency—to have assignments support one another so that progress achieved in one area is not canceled out in another. They don’t grade journal entries, for instance, because the journal gives their students a safe place to record their experiences and develop their ideas. Grading journal entries would destroy that safety.

Teachers are keen observers—they have to be to survive and to teach well. The Project research course sharpens and trains these powers of observation, and the research articles are now leading to more changes in practice.

If both the inservice presentation and the research articles are so effective in improving practice, why be concerned with theory? I can think of several reasons. The forced/trees distinction is one. Our classes are more than thirty-three individual students, and our teaching is more than a collection of assignments. Just as our individual observations inform our theory, our theory informs our observation. We observe from a point of view, from an idea, from a theory. To allow others to interpret our data, we make explicit our theory. Janet Emig has voiced this even more vigorously:

At the moment, I am quite upset with many of the studies in English/Education for their anti- or atheoretical nature. Persons don’t seem to belong to any tradition. They don’t have a point of view. Jake Getzels once went to an AERA meeting and got very furious. "Damn it," he said, "stop giving me your data. What do your data mean?" I find an immense inability in too many of our young people working in the field to acknowledge their origin; and I think it’s a function of trivializing education. There are "the experts," too; but

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they don't know who their ancestors are. If you don’t, you don’t have a tradition. If you don’t have a tradition, you’re not part of an intellectual enterprise. You don’t have a prayer of ever being regarded a scholar. *(The Web of Meaning, p. 157)*

All of us generalize. All of us have a theory of teaching writing. Position paper assignments at the beginning and end of each course and Institute are an attempt to make our theories explicit. But unless we know how we came to our theories, we are at their mercy. We can discover our theoretical ancestors through reading and reflection and come to understand our place in the tradition and with an understanding of our heritage, it becomes possible for us to direct the course of our individual and collective history.

As persuasive and powerful as our individual observations are, we don’t always have the opportunity to communicate specifics. In a recent editorial in the *Post*, the editors state: "although high school teachers know it perfectly well, they sometimes have difficulty carrying that message to school boards and parents, let alone young children." I think this is just as true of elementary and college teachers; the inability to carry the message may have as much to do with the listeners as with the speakers. Nevertheless, despite the great strides made recently in our own part of the profession, we still lack sufficient credibility and respect to do our job without unjustified hassle. An understanding of our theory-making and our traditions enables us to persuade the rest of our profession and the public at large of the soundness of our practice.

One last reason for theory concerns the depth and breadth of our knowledge of the profession. The Project has led the way in having teachers practice what they preach—writing teachers must write. As we branch into other disciplines, we will spread this idea—math teachers must math, history teachers must history, and so forth. And out of this first hand knowledge of our own discipline, we will listen with a critical and challenging ear to the generalizations of other writers, mathematicians and historians. We will become, in a broader and deeper sense, "learning experts" not confined to the classroom or formal education, but possessing credentials in home learning, on the job learning, and learning for life. We know that our best theories are transferable outside our classroom, and we have an immensely valuable contribution to make to society. It is up to us to make it.

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