SURVIVAL VS. INNOVATION: TESTING THE NWP MODEL

Home Economics teachers have puffy white cheeks from eating too many test-oven popovers, but hers were tanned, with prominent cheekbones. And Home Economics teachers look too clean and pressed, wearing clothes from old pattern books; hers were comfortable, chosen for fabric and color, not for darts or pleats. Home Ec teachers are punctual and composed. Mary was late, breathless, disheveled. She took the last place in our semicircle of nine chairs and muttered loud enough to be heard, "I don’t belong here."

July 4, 1982, 9:10 a.m., Michigan Technological University. The first meeting of the 1982 Copper Country Writing Project and my first summer as co-
director. I was concentrating on projecting confidence, too nervous to scold myself for stereotyping. "Welcome to the fifth edition of CCWP," I said to the expectant group, pointedly ignoring Mary's comment.

Previous Project directors had sadly shaken their heads over the enrollment list. Mary wasn't the only one who didn't "belong." In an effort to keep the CCWP alive, we had accepted all of the eight applicants, barely enough for the section to make. In addition to Mary, the Home Economics teacher, the other participants identified themselves as

Connie: high school composition teacher (7 years experience)
Jean: parttime freshman composition teacher (1 year experience)
Judy: high school literature teacher
Pam: elementary reading teacher
Joanne: elementary speech therapist
Carol & Eleanor: two seniors in the university's scientific and technical communications program

I was worried. Of the eight applicants, only Connie expressed confidence in her ability to contribute. I knew that much of the success of the NWP model came from drawing a group of strong teachers together to share their best practices. I had been a participant myself in such a summer institute in 1979. Was this small, diluted CCWP of 1982 only stalling the inevitable shutdown of this site? Had this fiveyear-old site exhausted its supply of interested, experienced teachers of writing?

Previously this Project had drawn on a teacher population scattered widely over Michigan's Upper Peninsula, one of the northernmost tips of the United States, an area that has long led the rest of the country in economic recession. Our sparse teacher population had recently been further reduced by defeated millage requests. The forced cutbacks completely eliminated athletic, art, and music programs in some schools, laid off many younger teachers, and forced many older ones to teach outside their subject areas. Mary, the Home Economics teacher, was a prime example. In June she had been told that the family life courses she taught were eliminated. She had the choice of retiring early or replacing the eighth grade English teacher. Under pressure from her superintendent, she canceled plans to take golf lessons and applied to the Project at the last minute. She was not there because she wanted to be.

I offer the details of what happened in this troubled site last summer in contrast to the 35 innovations reported from 18 strong sites that covered six pages of the March 1982 NWP Newsletter. I offer them because the group that I originally thought was "better than nothing" taught me three essential lessons about the project model.

Lesson number 1: Directors who expect to "fill the gaps" and at the same time preserve the integrity of the model are fools.

The eight people facing me on that first day were hardly the group the NWP model was originally designed to serve. Most of them came wanting to know how to teach writing. Two of them didn't even plan to teach; they planned careers as writers. I worried most about Connie, the experienced composition teacher—would she have anything to gain from the workshop? I wrote in my journal that first day that I hoped to fill in the gaps, provide them all with what they were looking for. (I feel more omnipotent in July than in other months.)

Fortunately the power of the model was stronger than the worries and inclinations of the director. The typical weekly schedule of the institute—teacher presentations, guest presentations, writing groups, reading discussions—allowed me little time to follow through with my notion of filling in gaps, a notion which could have changed the Project into another boring teacher-led methods class. I scheduled guest presenters first, then Connie, then Judy. Soon the group members themselves began recognizing and filling gaps, drawing on their own strengths to complete the weekly schedules.

To balance the exclusive focus on the writing process and to stress the relationship between reading and writing, Pam transformed us into seven year olds to demonstrate the Language Experience Approach to teaching reading. We became second graders, and together wrote a story with Pam guiding and cheering us. Our adult selves could feel how the exercise called up our tacit understanding of narrative structure, how the group collaboration forced choices, how proud we felt of what we wrote for others to read.

Jean, the freshman composition instructor, addressed group members who struggled with as they moved into Moffett, Mode 3, and formed her presentation around problem solving and brainstorming techniques.

Joanne, the speech therapist, saw the need to demonstrate that all language teachers are therapists and that to teach well, we have to become conscious of processes that for most of us are unconscious. She put mirrors in our hands and asked us to look at our alveolar ridges, our incisors, and our soft palates. We

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drooled, slurred, and laughed as we broke down the production of the seemingly simple word *table*. The speech therapist’s presentation left us in awe of how children learn to talk long before they enter our classrooms.

A few days later, during my own presentation on evaluating student writing, I began to realize that instead of me filling their gaps, this group was filling mine. I had asked them to respond to several problem papers written by college freshmen. One of the papers was written by a student who had worked with me in an unsuccessful, often frustrating, ten-week tutorial at the university’s writing lab. While the group focused on the larger problems, lack of development and focus, Joanne privately studied the language errors that the rest of us attributed to carelessness:

- **spelling errors:**
  - furnest for *furnace*
  - simi for *semi*
  - keln for *kiln*

- **puzzling phrasing:**
  - *hair lifting encounter* for *hair raising encounter*

- **confusing sentences:**
  - “I was scared now and was yelled once several times in fear of my life.”

To her, they were signals of an undiagnosed language disorder—probably related to a hearing problem. Her explanation made it painfully clear to me that my inability to help him improve his writing was not due (as his classroom teacher and I thought) to his lack of motivation, but to my own limited vision. Ironically, his paper was a narrative about one of the many times his father had lost his temper with him for not “hearing” and following directions. What had before seemed undeveloped and pointless became poignant in this new light.

My initial concern about the ability of these people to contribute was ill-founded. Mina Shaughnessy encourages the writing teacher to “venture into fields where he is not a scholar” to gain “more precise definitions of the behavior called writing” (*Errors and Expectations*, p. 293). The contributions of the speech therapist and the reading teacher to the 1982 CCWP illustrate the value of this venturing. To the Project concept that reads, “Writing cannot be taught in composition classes alone,” I would like to add that the teaching of writing cannot be strengthened by relying solely on the resources of our own discipline. Maintaining a Shaughnessy-like respect for student error demands a willingness to be taught by other language experts. The Project model allows this to happen.

Other language specialists can contribute to Writing Projects in valuable ways, but what about Carol and Eleanor, the two students majoring in scientific and technical communications? Together they taught me:

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**Lesson number 2:** The success of the Project comes from expectations of strong contributions not from recruitment of strong contributors.

Carol and Eleanor joined the group hoping to gain a better understanding of the writing process and more writing experience, but both were uneasy about taking a class meant for teachers. At first neither they nor I were sure about how they would fit in, or what they had to contribute.

Because Carol and Eleanor were parents of school-aged children, they fit comfortably with the rest of us in terms of life experience, but neither of them had ever taught nor did they plan to teach after graduation. After the first anxious week, they both decided to present what they knew best about writing in the best possible way. Carol’s upper-division technical writing courses had introduced her to editing methods for improving style and clarity. Her presentation of these offered the classroom teachers something concrete to improve their own writing as well as exercises to take back to the classroom.

Eleanor drew on her interest in journalism, and her presentation took teachers off campus for writing material. She arranged for an early morning tour of one of the local copper mines, an apt choice for the project named after the now-defunct industry. (Mines which had once flourished here were now only tourist attractions.) We shivered in the damp 45 degree mine and ducked as bats flew over our heads, but we came back with enough to say that in half an hour under Eleanor’s direction, we had put together a whole newspaper. The next morning we found *The Mode* typed on our desks. The wealth of detail that first-hand experience provides left us teachers wondering why we had never thought of taking our students out of the building. In addition, the different journalistic roles Eleanor had assigned left us eager to discuss how they had affected our approach and writing style. Sample roles:

Your story is going on the back page on Saturday. Never mind that everyone is at the beach or on vacation or ready to clean the bird cage. Your story will be used as reference material 100 years from now. Be historical. Use literature and facts available.

Your name is Gloria Straitlace and you’re a virgin. You’ve just been demoted from editor of Mrs. magazine to the old-fashioned society editor of a midwestern weekly. A wedding is taking place inside the local mine. The bride wears white. The groom appears to be indifferent. This story will appear on the Family and Friends page along with a swimmers’ itch article and another one about estrogen helping the sex lives of menopausal women.
Like Dustin Hoffman playing Tootsie, we developed empathy by trying on these new voices.

The students' contributions didn't stop with their presentations. Carol arranged for a hands-on session to introduce the class to the word processor and its capabilities. Eleanor, who was never without her camera, spent the month after the institute putting together a slide/tape presentation which is being used to recruit for the 1983 institute. In addition, alliances were formed. Eleanor joined Pam and Judy to draft a proposal for the 1983 Michigan Reading Association Conference. All three are on the program this month in Grand Rapids.

The non-typical members of the 1982 group were also the ones who taught me:

Lesson number 3: It is the nonhierarchical structure of the writing groups that unleashes voices kept silent for 30-40 years.

Both Carol and Eleanor had studied in a university (Michigan Tech) noted for its writing-across-the-curriculum program. Professors well published in composition journals had taught them—Toby Fulwiler, Randy Freisinger, Bruce Petersen, Carol Berkenkotter, Elizabeth Flynn. They had done journals, they had written multiple drafts, they had revised, they had heard about James Britton, and they knew that expressive writing was the matrix. But they had never before written with the power and the personal voice that they did in the institute. Carol helped to identify the element that is so hard to translate from the summer's experience to the classroom in the fall. In her position paper she explained:

As a student in Tech Humanities Department, I had already been exposed to most of the ideas presented. What gave me pause to reflect was the structure of the workshop itself. For the first time in my educational career, there was no traditional teacher. We were all to participate as learners as well as teachers. We all had something to offer, and there was no one authority. In a nonhierarchical structure where the teacher fully participates as a writer in the class, no one individual becomes the writing authority. I learned that lively writing, writing with a strong personal voice and authority, demands the prerequisite of honesty and vulnerability. The structure of the group creates an atmosphere vital for the exploration that results in lively writing.

Carol refers to me as a participating writer because I shared journal writing with the group and because at the last minute I had decided to share with the group the writing I had done the summer of 1979. I presented my modes not as models (which is how I think my writing is seen when I share it with college freshmen), but as parts of myself, in part a way to temper the guilt I was feeling at how much I was asking from them. Because these pieces of writing were such an intimate part of me and because the decision to share them had been made impulsively, my voice trembled as I read aloud Mode 1 the first week. Eleanor referred to this occurrence when she addressed me in her final evaluation:

Nancy, your own raw vulnerability with your first paper that you shared with us had to be the turning point for me. It opened a flood gate of expression from my own resources and made me want to give everything I could to each assignment.

In a regular classroom facing 60-90 students a day, I have not the strength nor courage to be so vulnerable. And regardless, no matter how I try to disguise it (telling students to call me by my first name, getting to know them by theirs, not assigning letter grades to early papers, keeping the classroom informal), my students cannot, after 12 years of working in an authoritarian atmosphere, forget that I am the one who eventually assigns the grade.

At the end of the summer workshop, Eleanor, who had just passed her 40th birthday, wrote:

Without the threat of a grade or a red mark for a misspelled word, the words ran across the paper like spilled ink forming its own shape. It's something stronger within me now that I feel is worth expressing. Happy birthday to the other half of my life.

Carol and Eleanor helped me to see why my students continue to ask "Is this what you wanted?" rather than "Is my voice clear in here?" They call attention to the Project concept that "Writing to communicate with an identifiable audience makes the writing process significant to students" by illustrating what happens when the identifiable audience is always the invulnerable authoritarian wielder of a red pencil, the teacher. If the classroom hierarchy inhibits voice in adult students, what are its effects on young students?

And so my small group taught me last summer. I learned from the specialists and gained skills and insights from the undergraduates. Connie, the experienced writing teacher, didn't leave empty-handed either. At the end of the summer she wrote about the "tremendous relief of having my own discoveries reinforced." I had felt the same way as a participant in the 1979 institute. It was what Sam Watson recently referred to when he said the Project "does not teach anything at all." Instead, teachers "make their own intuitive knowledge accessible to themselves and, often for the first time in their professional lives, they build upon their intuition" (NWP Newsletter, January, 1983). The model is designed to allow that to happen.

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But what about the breathless woman who joined us reluctantly the first day? Mary, the displaced Home Economics teacher, was even later the second day. She was, she explained later, unable to stop throwing up. Mary, an articulate, well-read, politically active member of the community and an innovative teacher in her own discipline, was our case study in writing anxiety. Her difficulties stemmed from fear of correction for grammatical, usage, punctuation, or spelling errors. Mary, who came from a strong ethnic background with a rich oral tradition and who loved the sounds of Czech English, Italian English, Finnish English, felt her heritage was illegitimate because it had been corrected so often. And Mary, who used tranquilizers the third day, had the most dramatic breakthrough. "Isn't it," she asked me the second week as we stood in the cafeteria line, "usually the college bound kids who get the writing courses in high school?" In response to my nod, she said, "They've got it all wrong. It's the others who need that last chance to discover themselves."

More than anyone, Mary opened to us her home, her friends, her life. At her home, she introduced us to Scottish eggs and head cheese, and her friend Verna Mise, a remarkable woman who had waged a one-person letter writing campaign and in the course of 13 years had succeeded in winning a court order to ban the dumping of taconite into Lake Superior. In the middle of Verna's tale about the rolls of stamps and the long evenings and weekends at the typewriter, she paused and raised her hand to her mouth. "Oh my goodness," she said, "I just remembered you're all English teachers and completely lost my train of thought."

Our summer ended with Mary's father, an 85 year old retired teacher, passing out candy and tales of the old days. He sat at ease in the front of the room while the rest of us shot questions at him, trying to figure out what has changed and what hasn't. He willingly posed for pictures with Jean whom he had taught and Connie whom Jean had taught. Several days later I sat in the empty class building, and wrote to Mary, the "weakest" contributor, with tears in my eyes—"You have enriched my summer."

I understood then what Jim Gray must have figured out in 1974. The Project doesn't "work" simply because successful experienced teachers of writing (who were no doubt also successful students of writing—good spellers, proficient grammarians, etc.) gather together. The power of the model does not come from strength reinforcing strength. What makes the Project work is the Pygmalion theory, the expectation of strong contributions, and the structure that allows the director the freedom to learn, not teach, to get her gaps filled. The diversity of the CCWP, 1982, allowed that to happen—and Jean, and Judy, and Connie . . .

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