DOES THEORY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

It's taken me several months to understand what I learned at the Language and Learning in the Humanities Summer Institute in London. At this point two main ideas seem to be emerging: the difference between the British and American systems of education and the place of theory-making in the use of language. For this article I'd like to focus on theory-making, leaving the former topic to ferment a while longer.

I suspect that theory-making got a bad name from the notorious abuses of college professors involved in the preservice training of teachers. We've all heard it—all theory, no practice. In many instances the college teachers had never taught in elementary or secondary schools and had little knowledge or appreciation of the challenges of the classroom. It was this void that Teacher/Consultants have come to fill so expertly—"The best teachers of teachers is another teacher."

Inservice teachers hear from the Teacher/Consultant by participating in the assignments given to students, and many of these teachers take back for use "Monday morning" the very activities demonstrated by the Teacher/Consultant. For many it is the beginning of an upward spiral of success in teaching writing. A few teachers, however, return the next week with, "I tried it and it didn't work." Mike Torbe, a British teacher who does much writing about language across the curriculum, told the story of a teacher who learned about writing for the real world at a workshop and decided to try it in her classroom. She knew that her students were particularly excited about a football player who had survived a serious operation to return to play again. She asked her students to write letters to him, which they gladly did, and then she collected them, selected the best one, and placed it on the bulletin board. None of the letters were ever mailed.

How does this example differ from the thousands of successes? One way to look at it is that this teacher left out an important part, no doubt a part amply described in the presentation. Another is to examine the theories that underlie the two opposing approaches to the activity—real world writing vs. classroom writing. The teacher in this story is no less a theorizer than the workshop leader, for it was her theory, not the practice of the workshop leader, that prompted her not to send the letters. But how do we promote a theoretical consistency which does not plunge us back into the dilemma of our predecessors?

One way I can see this working is to pose a question in a presentation after the teachers show a desire to take the activity back to their own classes. I can think of a few ways to phrase such questions—"What are some of the underlying principles that you see making this a successful activity?" or "If this activity were used with a different level of students, what parts would need to remain unchanged to still have it work?" I've found that teachers have no trouble making explicit the underlying theories.

In the final analysis, one of the things we're doing in the project is providing an incentive for teachers to change their theories about the teaching of writing. It seems to me that just as an awareness of the process of writing can help us when we write, so too an awareness of the process of making and using theory can help us when we carry information from one context to another. Theory, in this sense, serves as a bridge, and as with real bridges, it doesn't make much sense to stay on it too long.

Donald Gallehr is director of the Virginia Writing and member of the NWP Advisory Board