TEACHING THE DIRECTORS

What surprised us most in directing our first Ohio Writing Project Institute was that the Fellows developed such closeness and confidence in themselves as a group. At first we assumed that this was merely the logical result of the “model’s” emphasis on group inquiry techniques and on having the teachers take responsibility for their own learning. Things were going as planned. Or were they?

By the second week, we began to see that this camaraderie and group confidence also created problems. For one thing, the Fellows were unwilling to rigorously evaluate the work of anyone within the group. For another, they became antagonistic toward anyone outside the group—including us. Specifically, our concern with theory and research seemed to have little relevance to their problems. Their attitude was revealed in a limerick that turned up in the daily log one morning:

There once was a teacher named Max
Who on grammar knew all of the facts.
But one day in the hall
With Gil, Mary et al.
’Twas revealed they were nothing but quacks.

We laughed along with the group when the limerick was read in class. But alone together, after class, we expressed different emotions. We felt somewhat akin to Dr. Frankenstein when he first discovered his “creation” out of control—dismay, even betrayal.

Quacks indeed! We began to look for solutions. In truth, we found none to the first problem, except to reemphasize whenever we could that all presentations that come before the group get a fair and honest evaluation. The second problem forced us to rethink our own roles, which led us to take more seriously our own public statements about teachers in the institute being treated as professionals.

To begin with, we learned to present theoretical material strictly in the context of classroom techniques. Then we encouraged the Fellows to take more responsibility for directing their own learning in the institute and, later, for directing other Project activities. For example, at the end of each week during the summer, we asked the Fellows to give us brief written evaluations of the week’s program and to suggest changes for the following week. We were able to implement almost all the suggestions. At the end of the institute, we chose one of the Fellows as a co-director, responsible for coordinating the inservice programs. We continue to encourage former Fellows to take an active part in running the Project, planning and conducting inservice programs and presentations to teachers and administrators.

In essence, we discovered that much of the problem in the “groupness” lay in our own inability to loosen the reins and allow the teachers to take charge and make decisions. As we implemented the weekly suggestions, giving the Fellows more control, they began to trust us as much as they trusted each other.

At first, the group identity intimidated us. Now we believe that it is a necessary step in the development of individual confidence. As one of the Fellows commented on her final institute evaluation:

Teachers get so little support for their problems, their endeavors, their hopes and dreams. To find 26 people who were supportive, who listened, was for me a wonderful experience. It has truly changed my attitude toward teaching. In the end, it was “twenty-six people,” twenty-three Fellows and three Directors. We taught them theory. They taught us something more. Not only can teachers teach teachers, they can also teach directors.

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