KNOWLEDGE: A DIMENSION THE WRITING PROJECT MODEL NEGLECTS?

Is there any knowledge which Fellows of a Writing Project ought to have?

To a certain kind of professor, such a question would provoke an immediate "of course," followed by lists of concepts or titles. This paper forgoes such lists; I shall propose no single book, theory, or body of research which should be known by everyone — or anyone — connected with a Writing Project or otherwise concerned with the teaching of writing.

My reticence comes only partly from timidity — a desire not to anger the tagememicists or the advocates of the imagination, the sentence-combiners or the deconstructionists, the classicists or the neoromantics among writing teachers and theorists. But knowledge or even apparent knowledge is power, and power can be used as a weapon in the battles for academic position, a weapon turned against teachers and others who have not read the right books and who cannot or will not speak the language of furrow-foreheaded theoreticians, jargon junkies, and glib conventioneers who now profess their interest for writing. Knowledge used as that sort of power becomes something other than knowledge. This danger is the deeper source of my reticence.

It is all too easy simply to ignore knowledge as being irrelevant to teachers of writing. In effect, that is what many teacher-training universities continue to do, and their dereliction surely is one source of current dissatisfactions with writing instruction. Whether in the press or in the profession, many participants in the debate about writing notably are not those who have thought most seriously about the issues. For example, a recent book on writing instruction, supported by the Council for Basic Education, Empty Pages (reviewed elsewhere in this Newsletter, Ed.), boasts on its first page that the committee whose work it is "have in common the advantage that we are not 'experts' in the field of 'compositional theory,' but working teachers, writers, and editors." Unaccountably but predictably, two pages later the authors claim, "Because writing expresses the integrity (or dishonesty) of an intellectual process, it is a moral activity." Presumably the injunction to intellectual integrity does not apply to writers of books on the state of writing. Many of us concerned with writing do seem to find satisfaction in our own ignorance. "It is very queer, but not the less true, that people generally are quite as vain or even more so, of their deficiencies than of their available gifts." Hawthorne could almost have had us in mind when he wrote those lines. Our indifference with regard to knowledge of our field is a passiveness which may not be entirely wise.

Knowledge can be a weapon, wielded by professors against teachers, by teachers against students. Yet teachers surely are responsible for knowing the field in which they teach. Thus my title is a question, not a thesis: Is knowledge a neglected dimension in the Writing Project model? Could increased emphasis be placed on knowledge, without damaging the model itself? The question arises for me in two contexts. As a site director, I want our summer seminar to be as fruitful as it possibly can be, for the persons directly involved and for the teachers whom subsequent in-service activities will reach. Our Fellows leave the seminar enthusiastic and experienced both in their own writing to some extent and certainly in a wide range of techniques presented on the teaching of writing.

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would not sacrifice any of those qualities. Yet I do wonder if they leave the seminar informed about the writing and questioning in any convincing way the pedagogical techniques which may present themselves. Said differently, I wonder if they are conscious of and confident in the knowledge they have actually acquired. If they are not, I wonder how long their enthusiasm will last and how effective their work with teachers will be.

The second context is more general: From a number of different quarters, people are concerned to reconstitute a discipline of writing or, more accurately, of rhetoric. Disciplines usually get defined in terms of some body of identifiable theory, methodology, and research findings. Of all those efforts to develop a discipline concerned with writing, the Writing Project quite possibly is the most effective. From it, what can we learn about the evolution (and the definition) of a discipline? Within it, might any shifts in emphasis make it an even more effective agency for change, in instruction as well as in the other dimensions which characterize a discipline?

It is impossible to approach any of those questions responsibly without bearing in mind the sources of the Writing Project's success. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to sketch those sources as I see them and to suggest how knowledge might be incorporated to strengthen the model further.

The times are ripe for writing. Even the "basics" movement, with its hard-nosed but mush-minded language of certitude, is more than a call for all subjects and verbs to agree. "Back to the basics" signals a hunger for a simpler time perhaps, but more profoundly a hunger for meaning. I do not know in what senses there "is" a writing crisis, but I am convinced a reason people perceive one is that they realize, in some intuitive way, that in the peculiarly human action which is writing, persons achieve meanings, that writing invokes a human dimension, irreducible to rule.

I am not being cynical at all in suggesting that one reason for the Writing Project's success is its simultaneous appeal to opposing values. We who are directly involved know how important the Project is in feeding our hunger for meaning. At the same time, from the outside the Writing Project often is seen as some definitive method, some proven program, which assures improved writing. Clearly that attitude pervades many of the sources in which the Project is approvingly cited.

The Writing Project has been called "a program without a program." That comment, intended as a criticism, I take to be a compliment; certainly it offers us an insight into the Project's success. Within a Project there is no set of classroom practices which have become doctrinal and must be followed: for that matter no single theoretical frame-

work is insisted upon. Within a Writing Project, there are no experts. There are colleagues, persons with questions of mutual interest, who do not know everything, and therefore have reason to listen, but do know some things and therefore have ways to listen actively.

In the presentations not passively noted but actively experienced, in the expressive, experiential writing, in the writing groups, a Writing Project is a scene for human action and interaction. Aristotle long ago saw that rhetoric is not primarily an art of knowing timeless principles or of making things. It is most profoundly an art of doing things, an art of human action. And rhetoric, along with dialectic, of all the arts is the only one which argues opposites. What Aristotle never quite glimpsed is that knowing is itself a human action, in which we often argue opposites. The mutual support, the challenges of various perspectives, the expressiveness, the active audiences, the nurturing of participants' intuitions, all central to a Writing Project, do not stand opposed to knowledge; nor are they unfortunate accretions to it. They are, we in the twentieth century are beginning to see, indispensable grounds of knowing. The hunger which a Writing Project feeds is in part epistemic.

To feed that epistemic hunger, all the dimensions of the Writing Project model are essential. Knowing becomes a possibility in those uncomfortable middle places, between competing perspectives, between one's own experience in writing and ideas on teaching writing, as one seeks to see each in terms of the other. But I doubt whether these dimensions are sufficient for lasting change either in Fellows' own teaching or in the discipline of writing more generally.

Effective change requires a framework which, rooted in experience, becomes conceptual. Without that, even the best intuitions will quickly become useless; more accurately, they will become ignored, by others and even by the persons who have held them. In print and in professional meetings, scholars of writing are taking more and more seriously the kinds of intuition and experience a Writing Project offers. Last spring's Ottawa conference, Learning to Write, surely the richest conference on writing yet held, left me with the distinct impression that scholars' current insights support our best intuitions as writers and teachers. Without such confirmation, I wonder how much we will continue to trust our own intuitions.

Without some such framework, I wonder how much we will either extend our intuitions or make our knowledge accessible to others. I wonder about the excellent group of teachers in our Writing Project, for example. When challenged by parents, principals, or school boards, will they be able to appeal to any authority beyond the Project itself? I
doubt it, and they need not be left so defenseless. Within their own classrooms, will they continue to question and to learn, from the student writing they read and the activities they encourage? I hope so, but I would like to be more confident. Without some sort of informing context, teaching techniques lapse into gimmickry and teachers are unable to explore options, to initiate and to appraise changes. The end of a Writing Project seminar ought to be a point of departure rather than an arrival.

To encourage that orientation, I think we should insist when Fellows are presenting their own best teaching practices, they should have seriously sampled some of the research and professional articles which bear on those particular practices, and, of course, many have already done just that. The point should not be for the reading to subsume the practice but for each to inform and challenge the other. Probably we have all experienced the student whose writing and thinking are reasonably coherent and purposeful as long as they proceed only from that person's experience but whose work, as soon as he is asked to add a footnote, explodes into chaos because he has no way to attend to his own meanings while standing in fearsome awe of the printed word. That is bound to be a challenge for teachers as well, one which can and should be met within the supportive environment of a Writing Project.

The success of the Writing Project model demonstrates that a discipline, certainly our discipline, is not theory and research findings alone. More profoundly, a discipline is a matter of continuing, challenging dialogue among a community of persons who have accepted the commitments of that discipline. Without this dialogue, research findings or theory would rarely come into being; without continuing dialogue, they would quickly lose their reason for being. The Writing Project model already offers a scene for conversations, on writing and in writing, within ourselves and among ourselves. To disrupt those dialogues would be to undermine the model's success. However, it seems to me that within a project many dialogues could fruitfully be broadened. While continuing to hear our own voices as writers and to learn from our varied experiences as writing teachers, we should also hear those other voices which appear in print. I am proposing no more than that. In some of those printed voices we can expect to find challenge, extension, and support of our own perceptions. We should find ourselves members of a growing community much broader, more supportive and more diverse than any single Project site can provide.

A year hence, I hope I can report success on that score from our site. I hope many of our Fellows will be reading, and reading purposefully. I also hope to suggest from the beginning some loose theoretical framework for concerns in writing, one which can evolve through the summer and beyond, helping Fellows place the ideas they have and hear, seeing them in relation to each other.

In the meantime my goal is to continue asking what might be meant by "knowledge" and in what roles it might strengthen the impressive potentials that the Writing Project model clearly enjoys. This paper will have served its purpose if, through raising those questions, it contributes to a continuing dialogue among members of the Writing Project community.

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