"Knowledge: A Dimension the Writing Project Neglects?" was delivered as a paper to NWP site directors at the NCTE convention in San Francisco, November 1979. In response to that presentation, Les Whipp, Director of the Nebraska Writing Project, wrote the following open letter:

WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

I've been thinking, Sam, about the question "Do we think in images? or in words?" The question was put to me by one of our graduate students this afternoon. You'd think they'd have better questions, but that one did interest me once more. I asked her to give me another question which took the form "Do we X in Y?" in which the expression "in Y" spoke of an instrument of means, that is, in which "in" seemed almost like "with" or "by." She couldn't do it, and neither could I at the time, so she concluded that the expression "Do we X in Y?" was a very curious expression. Well, it is, with that sense of "in Y," isn't it? But it is nevertheless very familiar. What occurs to me tonight is the question "Can you think in German?" said to someone who is not a native speaker of German. I find that a particularly helpful related use because it suggests how the questioner is thinking of the expression "in pictures," as if there were some tough kind of equivalence between thought and pictures, as there is between German and English. I suppose you can

(Continued on Page 4)
WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

(Continued from Page 3)

give me a dozen other instances of the “Do we X in Y,” where “in” works like “by” or “with.” I wish you would. Not being a linguist does have its drawbacks sometimes. A dozen other instances would be very helpful in narrowing even further the way in which that curious expression “in Y” is working here.

It’s not really that expression which interests me right now though; instead it’s the expression “what teachers need to know.” Or even “what teachers need.” I made turkey soup last night. I found out that it needed a bit of pepper. I found that out by tasting the soup. It was a pretty good turkey soup, actually, for an amateur. I’m a little better as a cook than I am as a linguist, but not much. Still, I made pretty good turkey noodle soup from the carcass of our Thanksgiving turkey. I have sometimes cooked by looking in the spice cabinet to see what was there and putting in a little bit of whatever we had; my wife has discouraged that, but not nearly so much as the results did. But that does suggest a good deal of my competence as a cook.

The expression “what teachers need to know” must have with it — to get back to what I was talking about — some way of finding out, I suppose. My wife must take massive doses of iron, huge doses, so big the pharmacist always tries to suggest that the doctor made a mistake. But the doctor has a way of finding out what my wife needs in the way of dietary supplements to correct the imbalance in her blood. I should think the expression “what teachers need to know” might go like that, that if we were to prescribe, we must diagnose the need in some way first, and have some sort of standard by which to judge when there was a need and when there wasn’t. Does it go like that?

We might take The English Professor as a kind of standard, I suppose, and assume that what the English Professor knows must be what it takes to make a good teacher. That troubles me a bit, partly because I have known so many English professors who were not good teachers, and so few English professors who knew anything at all about the fields of competence of their fellow English professors. I suppose I’m confused to some degree about this, but it does seem clear to me that there is no English Professor available to be a standard, or rather, that there are so many that there is no one. And even if there were, surely there would be such a gap between the arenas in which The English Professor would function and the arenas in which teachers function that it would be unreasonable to use the former as a standard for the latter.

We might, I suppose, look at teachers, indeed we might even ask teachers. The doctor does a bit of that with my wife, “How are you feeling, Vivien?” he says. “A little peaked, Doc, a little peaked,” she will probably not reply, “Well, I’m pretty tired most of the time, and depressed.” [There, that sounds more like her.] So, as he asks her, we might ask teachers, I suppose. “What angers you as a teacher?” “What frustrates you as a teacher?” “What did you wish today that you could do and couldn’t?” “Where did you fail today and why?” How would you phrase the questions? I guess we’d have to have several. And I guess we’d have to put them in several different ways, too, asking the students what made the teacher mad, watching the teacher ourselves, eliciting narratives from the teacher about peer relations, relations with the principal, the parents, the union, the committees and curricula and migraine headaches. I wouldn’t be surprised if we discovered that what the teachers need most was bio-feedback training.

Well, that’s certainly a limited notion, but it’s a step in the right direction. What makes that so limited is that it presupposes as the teacher’s goal something like “getting through the day without a migraine.” That’s a very real goal, a very difficult goal, for a great many teachers, because of the conditions under which they are teaching, but it is nevertheless a very limited goal.

We might generalize it a bit more by saying that what we should do is to watch teachers function in their environment, describe malfunctions, prescribe the kinds of training needed to correct the malfunction. In this slightly better form, I shouldn’t wonder if we would discover that what the teacher needs most is ways of dealing with those forces making teaching conditions intolerable, intellectual and instrumental ways of dealing — instruction and training in the politics of interpersonal relations, how to deal with peer pressures, bureaucratic entanglements, sexual exploitation, ill-conceived and badly executed curricular designs and units, homogenized and pasteurized textbooks, inflated class sizes, administrative intervention in such forms as minimum competency tests, parental projecting, public scapegoating and censorship committees in the community, to mention some of them.

“What does the teacher need?” That’s still a pretty limited understanding of the question. I’ve worked with how a teacher might cope with the pressures on a teaching position (bio-feedback), and with how the teacher might understand and undertake to re-form these pressures, but not at all with what is central, with the primary function you and I are concerned with, that is, with the function of allowing young people to expand their repertories of language. “What does the teacher need to allow young people to expand their repertories of language?” I suppose we have to have some standards here, don’t we? And some observations of the conditions under which young persons do and do not expand their repertories of language?

(Is that the central function with which you and I...
have to be concerned? I suppose someone might be concerned with maintaining traditional curricula, the core curriculum, The English Language or something of that sort; or with controlling the distribution of the indicia of class, status, or ethnicity; or with adjusting young people to fit a mass, technological consumption oriented society. And indeed you and I might share those concerns. But as I understand it, the question of what teachers need arises from our roles in NWP. It seems clear that in those roles, our concern must be centrally with the function of allowing young people to extend their repertories of language.)

Observe the conditions under which young persons do and do not expand their repertories of language. Contrast the roles, skills, abilities, and knowledge of teachers in relation to youngsters who do and do not so expand their language repertories. Identify the "needs" of teachers in relation to youngsters who do not so expand their language. "What teachers need." But surely this grossly outruns available knowledge and technology.

Perhaps if we go through the college catalogue and identify the exciting disciplines and prescribe them. At least that technology is available. A bit like cooking by adding whatever spices are on the shelf. Not clearly relevant, but available. A strange notion of "need."

Perhaps if we go through our personal reading lists — those of use who have time to read fairly widely — and identify the most compelling recent and relevant works — Britton, Hirsch, Shaughnessy, Moffett, Ohmann, Applebee pere, Applebee fils, etc., "What teachers need." At least that technology is available. A bit like using The English Professor as the standard. Clearly not relevant but available. "Oh, but those books are relevant!" Sell that to the teachers in the Oakland schools! Relevant to whom? The English Professor? "What teachers need." That's the trickiest need of them all.

I've got another need, though, just now: I need to quit this foolishness. And another need: I need to get some more cases in which we do X in Y. (Do send me some cases.) And another: I think I need a bowl of turkey soup.

Les Whipp is the Director of the Nebraska Writing Project.