TEACHERS' WRITING

The following pieces about the teaching of writing by NWP Fellows illustrate some of the "non-personal" writing done in and following a summer project. We have included a retrospective on the BAWP experience, two position papers and a curriculum article — a slight sampling of the range of forms, modes, voices, and purposes that participants explore. The editor thanks the many site directors and participants who submitted manuscripts and regrets that we cannot publish many, many more. The stack is 18½ inches high — testimony to the productivity of writing project teachers.

A WRITER'S TRAVELOGUE

Tom Bremmer

He carries his topic like two sacks of groceries, an unwieldy load. The left sack is heavier than the right; the right sack's tearing; potatoes bounce across the trail.

He hoists his topic to his back like a backpack or a cross, not unwilling at first. With each step the burden grows heavier, bears down on him. He begins to hate his topic.

He carries his topic like a rifle slung over his shoulder. As he enters the forest he loads and cocks, keeps a sharp eye and hunts the truth. Truth flickers like shadows. He wastes all his rounds firing at where the light hides.

He carries his topic like a durable, comfortable jacket. He starts out with it hung across his arm. He slings it over his shoulder, hooked at the collar by his index finger. He puts on the topic; it becomes a kind of skin. He is no longer aware of the topic as separate from himself. This is called Acceptance.

He wears the topic into the forest. He turns a slow circle: sees how the alder gives way to fir as the woods climb the slope, watches the light splash to the forest floor as the trees move in the easy wind, discovers the tangle of salal and gooseberry and how the fern rings these plants. We call this Discovering Parts.

He touches the fabric of his jacket. The jacket is not there. What he is wearing is the forest itself. He is in the forest, yet the forest puts him on. The jacket was always the forest. The forest is trees, ferns, light, shadows, sounds — all of these. The word forest does not seem big enough. The word does not speak of the insects that flirt from leaf to leaf or burrow into loam or gnaw at bark, the bird sounds and the rustle of small animals he cannot see. He senses an order that escapes rational control. This is his topic — that quality of wild-ness. He names it. Imposes his language upon the quality. Wilderness. This is known as Calling by the Right Name.

He spreads out his topic like a map. Finding true North, he studies the contours and landmarks the map shows. He discovers where he is, and where he

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ON BALANCE

I once rode a mule named Sarah to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The skinner assured us that all the mules in the train had made the trip down the narrow trail hundreds of times. That fact was of no comfort to me. I was terrified. I could only peek occasionally at the grandeur before me, my awareness glued to the narrow trail under Sarah’s feet, the cliff to our right, and the sheer drop-off to our left. I became furious at poor Sarah who insisted on walking at the utmost edge of the abyss. As she leaned toward it, I leaned toward the cliff, hoping to direct her toward a saner route. In fact, I leaned at such precarious an angle that my hat fell off, and my right leg began to cramp. And still Sarah persisted. To ease my aching leg, I forced myself to move slowly toward a straighter posture, and to my amazement Sarah shifted her weight and moved to the center of the trail. Suddenly I understood. When I sat centered in the saddle, she no longer had to compensate for the ridiculous problem in weight distribution I had posed for her.

Teaching students to compose while we sit astride some abstract idea about discourse may be analogous to my memorable trip. Many of us continue to ride at a forty-five degree angle, obstinately refusing to question our most fundamental assumptions about teaching and about our discipline. Often, I think we do not even know our fundamental assumptions, have not located the beliefs which determine our posture. If we are to make any strides in improving the writing of our students, we need an easy balance, as well as Sarah’s wisdom about applying counterbalance.

Northrup Frye, in The Educated Imagination, speaks of our use of language on three levels: the level of self-expression, the level of the language of freedom and necessity, and the level of the language of vision. Our task it seems to me is to make it possible for students to explore all those uses of language. We are off balance if we focus on only one level, or one facet of one level—the study of other people’s visions, for instance, or the study of the language of necessity, language which someone else demands of students: forms to fill, tests to take, examination essays to write.

In any single act of discourse the function of self-expression and the function of communicating to an audience both operate, but may have different emphases. As teachers, we need to help [Continued on Page 14]
students discover how to balance those two language functions. Our programs must encourage students to read and write in a spectrum of forms—from those which are largely reflections of writers' personalities (as some poems and journals, even some stories and essays) to those from which the writer's individuality all but disappears (as in some technical writing or official documents).

I think we create a kind of imbalance when we work toward a limited form of exposition, as though it represented some sort of pinnacle. There are a number of writing sequences which offer experience in composing to different ends: from private attached self to public detached self; from intimate listener to unknown audience; from inner unformed thought to outer articulated statement; from implicitness to explicitness; from concrete to abstract; from proximate experience to remote event. I think sometimes we see these sequences as lines moving in the same direction, the ends collecting into one kind of expository writing as our ultimate goal: writing explicitly about an abstract idea drawn from remote events for an impersonal audience in a detached and impersonal voice.

Instead, we ought to realize that a piece of writing, if it is good, is an end in itself, finding its own balance between expressing and communicating, existing at some point along several possible continuums. Rather than leading to only one end, lines representing many sequences of writing experience may intersect at odd points, may be tangential, parallel, coincidental, even vectored or hyperbolic. A letter is no less important a way of making ideas clear than a five-paragraph essay. Van Gogh's letter to his sister Wilhelmina gives her a vivid word picture of his painting of the night cafe in Arles. A powerful autobiography is contained in the letter Kafka wrote but never sent to his father. Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham Jail is a moving essay written to concentric audiences. A fictional exchange of letters in Ambrose Bierce's "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General," creates a story in which the controlling theme, Bierce's moral stance, as well as what actually happens in the story, are all implicit.

Writing in a variety of forms, students need to practice finding a balance between the needs of the self and the needs of an "other." The writer's I is a being-in-the-world, trying to make sense of that world, composing it for himself and others by giving it shape and meaning through language. As the "I" perceives that world more accurately, as he remembers it, reflects on it, reconstructs it imaginatively, he locates himself in that world. One stands somewhere when one speaks, listens, writes or reads. Becoming gradually less centered in his own immediate world, locating himself in larger worlds, connecting himself to unknown speakers and audiences, the "I" in the world integrates the selves he is, the selves he was and hopes to become. Such practice in locating is just as important and as possible for poor students as for good ones, regardless of how much writing they must do in the future. When we use language, it is impossible not to take stands. When the student composes he composes himself.

Another struggle for balance: writers need detachment enough to be critical and involvement enough to care. Achieving detachment without losing touch seems to me a crucial goal for students. Generalizing and judging from the welter of experience is a sounder way to achieve that kind of balance than to begin with borrowed ideas; abstracting from the ground up teaches one that generalizations never truly describe individual instances. We learn to distrust the so-called experts who operate as though specific instances should be brought into line with their generalizations—psychologists, for instance, whose theories may institutionalize perfectly healthy people, or planners whose formulas do not fit the needs of a particular community.

If there is any single direction we ought to move in, it is toward discursive acts in which explicit ideas are clear because they imply the concrete experience they have come from, or in which implicit ideas are clear because concrete detail has been rendered in such a way as to make those ideas apparent. To achieve this, we must invite discourse from students which is authentic, written and spoken for real purposes, in real voices, for real audiences.

To use my analogy in a slightly different way, if one is to find sure footing, one's stance must be grounded in place and time, on particular trails at particular moments. If a student's footing is secure, he can attend to and reflect upon the canyon's vastness. Because he has actually been there, in reality or in his imagination, he will know of the canyon, and of canyons, not just about them. Too often we ask students to begin at the points of greatest detachment. We ask them to write for a teacher's purpose—to determine, for instance, whether students' comprehension of a literary work has met certain expectations. We tell them to find an idea to suit this purpose, support it with examples, omit the first person, write for an impersonal audience, and hand it in to the teacher. The student writes them with all his attention on the narrow trail, the precipice on his right or left, rather than on the meaning of his journey or the beauty of the canyon.

If we are to teach writing rather than merely assign it, we need a balance in our strategies. On
the one hand, we want students to experience writing, to get a sense of having transposed their own
moments and ideas into language. On the other hand, they need to know something of how
language operates, how to be critical of their own work, how to practice effectively. They need to
learn the value of mistakes and failures, as well as of success. To change my analogy again, had I learned
to ride Sarah around the corral, had the skinner
given me a few instructions ("Don't hold the reins
too tightly; don't treat the stirrups as if they were
clutch and brake; sit balanced in the saddle," I
might have gained control of myself much more
quickly. However, had I been forced to practice too
long, or been forced to make endless plans and
outlines, rewarded only by promises of a glimpse of
grandeur in the distant future, I'd have lost interest.

Further, as teachers we are off balance if we do
not try to apply what we believe to our own discursive
lives. We have to know what it feels like to put
experience into words, to struggle to articulate an
idea. We must try to get perspective on the voice
our students hear in our comments on their papers,
and in classroom exchange, and the same kind of
perspective on the voice heard by our friends and
colleagues. Couldn't we stop once in a while to
view a course, a class session, or an instance of our
own spoken discourse as a composition? How
might that composition be described in terms of
adequate predication? coherence? connectives?
attitude toward subject and audience?

Finally, we can imagine our profession as a bit like
Sarah, trying to keep her footing under different
riders. The tripartite view of language, literature,
and composition no longer seems a useful way to
talk about the field of English — to keep our footing
on rocky trails. Turning our attention to the student
in the act of composing, the experience of
composition seems a centering which will help us
maintain balance in spite of riders who lean at
dangerous angles — the cost accountant legislators,
the pre-college anxiety-ridden parents, the behavioral
objectives administrators, the back-to-the-basics
gang.

We teach English in an age when language is in
danger of being permanently severed from belief,
and thus from meaning. For our national leaders,
the appearance of credibility is often the only
necessary morality, and national crimes are buried
under mounds of self-contradictory language. We
must help students gain respect for and control
over their language and its vital connection to their
beliefs. We must help them learn that there are
cues in discourse to the speaker's intentions. We
cannot risk imbalances which keep students clinging
precariously to narrow rules for writing and
speaking, or which nearly separate them from their
beliefs, and us from ours.

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J. Dennis Robinson

**STUDENTS WRITE FOR PUBLICATION**

We often teach writing as if it is a training session
for a big event that never comes. We talk about
voice and audience until we drop, but it means little
if we do not provide real audiences. Class readings
help. They are a necessary beginning, as is group
editing, yet these are still artificial audiences, and
students know that. It has become my goal to
publish every one of my students every semester.

**Newspapers and Magazines**

There are presently over 200 Foxfire-type publica-
tions coming from schools across the nation, and
I detect a newspaper renaissance as well. The
photo-offset press has made publishing affordable.
Still, not everyone can begin a school periodical.

My journalism students produce a "newsmagazine" four times a year. Each edition runs only 20
newspaper-size pages, but costs $800. We distribute

2500 copies free to students, teachers and towns-
people. The money comes almost exclusively from
the sale of ads. We conduct ourselves as a business,
never begging local merchants. They respect the
quality of the writing, the artwork, and the fact that
we guarantee saturation of the local teen market.
No other publication in town can.

The Talon is produced in a classroom without the
benefit of an office or even a pasteup table. Our
supply stash consists of a dozen mutilated rulers, a
handmade bookcase, one school typewriter and
two drawers of a filing cabinet. We pay $50 extra for
our color cover and over $100 for smooth typeset
columns. I disagree with purists who say that every
speck of work must be done by the students; know-
ing when to use professional assistance is good

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business. My students are proud when their publication is mistaken for college work. Most of my students are not planning to go to college and yet each year 50 to 100 of them become published authors. And we get letters from readers, real readers.

Other Class Publications

After three years teaching journalism, I find deadlines have become almost routine, and I am beginning to apply the journalism model to my other English courses. Now each class produces a publication.

My “Fresqperson” class willingly wrote a grammar study guide. (As anti-grammar as I am, the school board isn’t.) They sold a hundred dittoed copies just before final exams and used the money to copyright the booklet. “This summer I’m going to Washington,” one student said to me, “and I’m going to the Library of Congress. I’m gonna sit in one of those desks and order a copy of our book to read.”

Students in Practical Writing regularly compile a “best of” book the last week of class. I provide ditto masters and each of us must make copies for everyone. On the penultimate day we each bind our collections in hardcovers ($4.95) or with plastic spiral spines (50¢). Some simply add the pages to a three-ring notebook and others go for the stapled-manila-folder model (64¢). We deliver a crisp copy to the principal and the superintendent. On the last day of class the authors read from their copy of the book. Autographs are exchanged.

The group work required to produce a class publication creates an atmosphere unlike that in more formal classes. There is an infectious sense of urgency, and in a well-planned class each student has an important role to play—editor, typist, proofreader, business manager, carpenter, layout person, custodian, accountant, salesperson, photographer. But they are not just playing because there will be, eventually, a tangible result. Imagine a hospital waiting room with ten or twenty expectant parents—but all expecting the same child.

Helping Individuals Publish

There is no need to abandon student publishing if you are not ready to orchestrate a major class project. If you already see students in individual conferences, you can easily urge different students to shoot for different audiences without disturbing the flow of an assignment, particularly if your students are allowed to choose their own topics. Any well done paper can be slanted to readers other than the teacher and the class.

Send a clever story to Redbook or an article to Seventeen. Hand written and illustrated books—buy commercial “blank” books or bind your own—can be given as gifts to relatives. Students may enter contests, chart and frame family trees, send anecdotes to Reader’s Digest or hints to Heloise. I keep a xerox copy of a $300 check for one former student who received a Digest sale, in case my students are dubious. But it is important to guard against over-enthusiasm. In my classes we greet a rejection slip and a sale with equal praise. Rejected articles go right back into the mail, and the student is ushered into our Reject Society of which I am a member many times over.

Make publishing a classroom routine. Have students write letters to movie stars, government officials, companies, long lost relatives, foreign pen pals, until letter writing becomes a reflex. Every student could produce a “How To” booklet on some topic. The best one I have seen was on sheet-rocking a home, and I found it more readable than Popular Mechanics. Most local newspapers are starved for student work because it’s free copy and excellent public relations. And most historical societies will preserve carefully transcribed oral histories. Have your kids take polls, design greeting cards, write reviews, script commercials for local businesses, draft games and puzzles, print calendars. But don’t leave them hanging. Publish.

Let the appropriate audience evolve through rewriting and discussion. This semester a sixteen-year-old named Natalie passed in a fairly dry but competent report on child abuse. I suggested that she throw out the jargon lifted from research materials and change a few odd sentences. “Make it so clear that even a little kid could understand,” I told her without comprehending my own directions. The next draft was addressed to a ten-year-old: “If your parents shout at you all the time or say you are bad when you know you are not, this may be dangerous for you. Doctors call this psychological abuse because it can hurt your mind.”

On a whim I asked Natalie to then make believe she was writing a pamphlet and sent the resulting design to a typesetter. For nine dollars we got a beautiful copy which we “dummied” and xeroxed. After Nat’s classmate Jayne took a copy of the pamphlet home, the Women’s Club, which had seen the child abuse pamphlet (thanks to Jayne’s mother) wrote us, wanting to pay for the printing of 2000 copies.

When Dave interviewed a truck driver for a career project, the school librarian suggested that such work be kept in the library as a resource for other students. Dave got very picky about his spelling after that.

Steve, a doodler, sketched an apt likeness of me during a lecture. I asked if he could do more. We compiled sixty teacher caricatures into a booklet and sold $300 worth in two days. The money will go
to a study of UFO's that John is now preparing for "national release."

Managing a Classroom of Publishing Authors

I would go crazy explaining these projects to students one at a time, so I have been collecting the instructions with sample projects in folders. There are dozens now, filled with newspaper clippings and scraps of ideas, bearing titles like "How to Remember and Record Your Dreams" or "Writing Lyrics To Your Songs." The most popular folder is "What To Do When You Can't Get Started." Students looking for ideas must skim the folders before they see me. Each project they choose must be carefully designed and must center on a writing skill that the student plans to improve. They must set deadlines and meet with me weekly.

School rules require my students to attend class every day of the week, but discipline problems are non-existent since everyone has a personalized project. On Wednesdays I talk (I can't fully break the habit) and on Fridays we share progress reports and ideas.


Publishing Tips

Following are ten tips to help you put publishing at the center of your courses, at any grade level and with any subject. It makes the prewriting and the conferences worthwhile in a totally new way.

1. Give your students credit and class time for producing the publication, for typing and designing and making phone calls. Keep track of production time on cards which the editor endorses. Each card must summarize one task a student has completed. If the summary is not clear and mechanically correct, no signature is given. I allow 25 percent of class time for work on a publication other than the actual writing. A grade can be reached quickly by finding the average hours worked and making a bell curve. Industrious students with weak language skills suddenly stand an equal chance.

2. If fund raising is necessary, allow for it as part of the course. Teach principles of advertising and salesmanship. If you cannot get your money in hand before going to press, typeset the work and show a "dummy" version to prospective sponsors. Don't undersell your product.

3. Plan frequent meetings with those who become key members of your staff. Consider only one or two problems per meeting and keep meeting time to ten or fifteen minutes.

4. Clearly define your goals and grading system at the start of the course. Students need to learn that more than high test scores and passive attention are required because production counts.

5. Advance planning is essential. Set short-range deadlines for each step of the program. (For example: Preliminary Notes due Friday, Rough Draft due the following Friday, Cover Art due Tuesday.) Plan much of the time for rewrite after rewrite. Stick to your deadlines firmly, but allow a day or two for problems that will arise. Some students must be late once and get chewed out by the editor to realize you are serious about deadlines. They want you to be serious.

6. Don't go for second best in graphics, particularly on the cover. The eye automatically focuses on pictures. Photographers and artists may need to do as many "rewrites" as authors.

7. Don't be shy; publicize yourself. Invite local papers to write about your publication process. If no one responds, you and your students should mail press releases. Include photos of students working and a shot of your publication or simply send copies of the art in your publication. Send complimentary copies to school board members, administrators, town officials, local and national VIP's. Leave copies in libraries, nursing homes, waiting rooms.

8. Write for the publication yourself and let the kids see you go through hell with them. Also, publish your writing elsewhere so that you can feel the power of another editor. Show the students what you are working on and let them edit you.

9. Introduce your students to Foxfire (Rabun Gap, Georgia, 30568) and other student publications to show them it can be done. Correspond with publishing students in other schools. Send for one of our little publications and one of my students will be happy to write back. Please include 50c to cover postage and mail to The Talon, Exeter Area High School, Linden Street, Exeter, NH 03833.

10. If there isn't student interest — let your publication die naturally, but blame no one, neither yourself nor the students. If there is student interest, but no support from the administration — fight like a tyrant. They will back you later when parents call to praise your stunning student publication.

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RETROSPECTIVE

Florence Lewis

To say that one is a writer suggests a mastery of form. Isak Dinesen protested that she wasn’t a writer, only a storyteller: “Moi je suis une conteuse and rien qu’une conteuse.” Even though Dinesen liked to play the part of Scheherazade, always ready with a tale for her friend, Denys George Finch-Hatton, whenever he returned from safaris, she did, finally, do more than give her stories oral expression. She wrote them. Writing as an art requires mastering form.

I am a storyteller too, full of lies and empty spaces and a great need to escape both. I know the chaos from which a story or, sometimes, an essay emerges. I know the joy that comes from bringing order to the chaos, finding the form. Mostly, I have sought the form without help from others because I have separated for too long the writer in me from the teacher. BAWP taught me otherwise. Out of a struggle with form must come a new strength in teaching and, paradoxically, a new strength in the understanding and the use of form. For when we struggle and note how and why we struggle, we become able to teach composition and writing as we never taught before. BAWP taught me respect for this struggle, both in myself and others. BAWP taught me that a good teacher doesn’t assign a writing task to a student that she doesn’t try writing herself. Why? To predict the student’s agony: To walk into a classroom and say, “Look, you will probably have trouble with this part of the assignment” or “I think you should take three steps here, not one” is to bring your flock closer to the green and out of the valley of despair which is, oftentimes, what a writing assignment becomes to the kids. A good teacher, I think, has to know what getting lost means.

The writer as teacher: the teacher as writer: the student as writer — BAWP gave me the power to leave somebody else’s prose alone, the power to let writing be, especially when the writer is a beginning writer, tentative and hesitant. I saw the strain and the pain of adults, my colleagues, writing, really writing for the first time. Perhaps it was a story that they had not dared even to speak aloud. Now they were finding and seeking the words and the imagery. Perhaps it was an essay which others would judge as they themselves had judged the writing of others. How does one criticize so that criticism becomes a constructive act, which is what criticism is supposed to be? How does one keep criticism impersonal? Or, how does one make criticism personal and loving and still be able to point out errors? I will always remember with respect and affection Cappy Lavin’s criticism of my own work. The hours it takes to be a good, careful, and compassionate critic . . .

BAWP taught me charity. I’m still learning.

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