From the Desk of Anne Ruggles Gere:

TEACHERS AS WRITERS

"Well yes," she said, "I do have a question. Why do we have to do so much writing? I'm not interested in becoming a writer, I just want to learn how to teach my students to write better."

I was interviewing an applicant for the Puget Sound Writing Program's first Summer Institute, and the woman sitting in my office was balking at the prospect of spending time on her own writing. I tried, with as much assurance as a new director can muster, to amplify the cliche that teachers of writing should themselves write. I talked about the need for teachers to experience first-hand what they require of their students, about the hypocrisy of urging others to participate in an activity in which one does not share, about the fact that she might actually enjoy writing. She nodded politely.

By August of 1978, when that first Summer Institute ended, this same teacher had spent five weeks in a writing workshop, and she had become a writer. I don't know whether it was the quiet scratching of 27 pens early in the day, the excitement of rediscovering parts of her past she thought she had forgotten, or the delight of listening to others' written language, but I do know that this teacher had developed a need to write. She carried a journal to school with her throughout the academic year, she began sharing her writing with her students, she polished one story and submitted it for publication, she began calling herself a writer.

All of us who participate in the National Writing Project have similar stories to tell. We have encountered teachers who argue against wasting time on their own writing. We have cajoled, made arbitrary statements, perhaps even threatened, but somehow we have persuaded frightened and unwilling people to start writing. And we have seen remarkable things: the diffident first grade teacher who constantly apologizes for her lack of expertise writes a superb poem; the withdrawn junior high teacher begins a novel on his war experience, explaining that he hasn't been able to talk about Vietnam since he left its shores; the competent but seemingly uninspired high school teacher writes electrifying short stories based on her experiences as a child (she says she has always wanted to write but never got around to it until she was forced) and before the year ends she has published two of her stories.

We know intuitively that this transformation is one of the most important accomplishments of the NWP. Yet it is hard to justify. Working on one's own writing seems self-indulgent. Evoking the past and nurturing poetic development do not produce quantifiable results acceptable to funding agencies. Overburdened teachers shouldn't be asked to add personal writing to their load. Arguments against teacher-writers multiply, but do not state the whole case. I have observed teachers.

I began to see the importance of encouraging teacher-writers when PSWP began in-service programs in the year following the first summer institute. In-service teacher groups never cohered as the summer group had; they were impatient with explanations, dismissing them as useless theory. We were several weeks into one in-service program when a teacher finally blurted: "Of course I appreciate all these good ideas about how to get kids started with writing, but what I really..."
Teachers As Writers
(Continued from Page 1)

want to know is, what do I do about students who start sentences with conjunctions?” Clearly everything we had said about the writing process had escaped her. She hadn’t really seen our colorful posters with words like prewriting, drafting, revising and editing written on them. She saw presentations as answering the eternal “what to do on Monday” question, but she had learned nothing about writing itself. Suddenly I knew why she had learned so little about writing and why the in-service teacher groups had seemed so different from the summer one; they weren’t doing any writing of their own.

In-service programs were short on time; we had 30 hours to accomplish what we had done in 100 hours during the summer. So we eliminated things, and one of the first things to go was the writing itself. Teachers did write as part of their participation in teacher/consultant presentations, but they did not form workshop groups to read their own writing and listen to that of others. They had heard about writing, but they hadn’t done any significant writing of their own. I know as well as anyone that one learns about writing by writing, that doing is the most effective form of learning, but I forgot it when time was limited. From that day forward we have included writing workshops as part of in-service programs no matter how limited the time.

If it is true that teachers in summer programs are different from those in in-service programs, it is also true that summer institute teachers change as the school year begins. Their confidence and idealism are tested by staggering class loads, and their reflective thinking is shattered by committee meetings, attendance lists, and hall duty. As demands on their time increase, teachers, like directors of NWP in-service programs, try to eliminate things, and their own writing is one of the first to go. “After all,” they say, “it’s more important to grade my students’ papers than to write in my journal. I can’t go to class and tell my students I haven’t read their papers because I was writing a poem.” Unlike their colleagues in, say, art or music, colleagues who find painting or performing an essential part of their teaching, many writing teachers see their own writing as superfluous to the task of instruction. Teacher/consultants often change from writers into former writers as the academic year progresses.

Perhaps teachers fail to continue writing because they don’t see writing as a specialized professional activity. Just as everyone uses oral language, so nearly everyone does some writing. Grocery lists and telephone messages may constitute the full range of an individual’s writing, but the individual can still claim ability to write. The person who sings in the shower or doodles during committee meetings is much less likely to claim musical or artistic ability. The NWP has begun to affirm the difference between simple scribal ability and sustained writing, but we must work continuously to convince teachers that their performance as writers is an integral part of their teaching responsibilities.

Of course, the most convincing assertions come from those teachers who do write. One says:

Kids are awfully perceptive; they can see through phonies right away. Other years when I told them that writing was important, they knew I didn’t really mean it. I never told them I didn’t write, but they knew. This year it’s different because I am writing, and my students know it. I say a lot of the same things I said other years, but now they believe me. It’s hard to explain, but I know that my writing makes me a better teacher of writing.

My private hunch—one not verifiable with existing research designs—is that teacher-writers not only make more effective instructors, but they have a hedge against the forces of teacher burn-out. Through writing they avoid being cut off from the sources of their own power and creativity.

The collection which follows, then, is more than another publication of teacher writing. We have all printed, covered and bound collections which circulate among family and friends and occasionally grace the desks of supportive administrators or local contributors to project coffers. What follows is visible testimony to the conviction that writing teachers must perform as writers. Read and enjoy.

Anne Gere is Director of the Puget Sound Writing Project and a member of the NWP Advisory Board.

NEW BAWP PUBLICATIONS

Five new titles are available in BAWP’s series of Curriculum Publications. In An Experiment in Encouraging fluency Miriam Ylvisaker describes the methods she used with her reluctant Oakland High School writers. Virginia Draper helps extend writing across the curriculum in Formative Writing: Writing to Assist Learning in All Subject Areas. Dick Friss traces the growth of a student writer through his semester course in Writing Class: Teacher and Students Writing Together. To teach students to use language responsibly, Flossie Lewis has assembled a useful series of exercises in The Involuntary Conversion of a 727 or CRASH! Finally, Mary K. Healy offers practical advice on Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom. These publications may be ordered for $1.50 each from Publications Department, Bay Area Writing Project, 5635 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.