From the Desk of Leslie Whipp:

**INSERVICE MUST BE TEACHER CENTERED**

The Nebraska Writing Project at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln has been extremely successful in encouraging good composition teaching in the schools of Nebraska, and that puzzles me. Our English Department has a long history of involvement in English teaching in the State, and in teaching composition specifically, and yet along comes the BAWP model and the effectiveness of our participation increases dramatically. Certainly it’s true that we have had some very good people involved in the Writing Project, and that certainly accounts for some of the effectiveness; yet we had very good people involved in our earlier efforts as well, so that’s not the whole story.

Thus, I am led to re-examine what’s fundamental in this model, and to recall what features our teachers have singled out for praise.

Three particular strengths of the model come to mind. First, the model is teacher-centered. Second, the model is very practical. Third, the model builds on teacher strength.

I want to begin and end with the notion of the model being teacher-centered. It is helpful to recall the alternatives to a teacher-centered program: colleges usually have professor-centered programs, institution-centered programs, or discipline-centered programs. In them, teachers are told they need this or that or the other thing. They fill in the blank with the Christensen method, transformational grammar, speech act theory, or something else theoretical and intellectual. I do not deny the relevance or importance of theoretical intellectual formulations to professors. I do deny the usefulness of many of these formulations to the K-12 teachers in the program. And I do mean to imply that many of the degree requirements that teachers encounter arise from interests other than their own, usually professorial. One astonishing feature of the National Writing Project model, and the major source of its strength, is that it is teacher centered, and in two chief ways: teachers are teaching teachers, and teachers are writing for other teachers and reading and discussing the writing of other teachers.

The second strength of the program repeatedly identified by teachers is that it is practical. The participants frequently contrast this model with the training they received in their pre-service preparation or another inservice program. Other programs, they indicate, do not offer what teachers “need.” I talk daily with colleagues, professors of English, professors of linguistics, professors of education, professors of film, who are quite free in telling me what teachers “need”; usually this need is in the particular field the speaker has mastered. I recall one instance of a secondary teacher studying for a Ph.D. which he sought for use within the public schools to enhance his status, authority, and skill in his own classroom. With this aim, he approached the studies for that degree with his students in the forefront of his mind. Several times he was criticized by university professors for being insufficiently abstract, insufficiently broadminded.

What struck me about this case is that the university professors have a dialect, as it were, a way of seeing and a way of saying; but teachers,
facing radically different contexts, radically different pressures, and radically different functions, have other very different ways of seeing and saying. Often when college professors are talking about what teachers "need," they are in fact talking about a dialect difference, are observing rather naively that teachers do not talk like college professors, do not share their interests, do not share their perceptions. And when teachers observe that the National Writing Project model is "practical," they are observing that this model is phrased in their dialect. As well it should be: the model is teachers teaching teachers, not professors teaching teachers.

It is more subtle than that, of course: the experience of writing, of having to discover something to write about and some form in which to express it, and of having to submit that writing to the scrutiny of other people and to sit still for their feedback—all of this reproduces for Project teachers the situations that their students encounter in the classroom day after day; and in a very "practical" sense, the teachers are reminded of the experience of their students and modify or reinforce their own behavior with respect to that experience.

This leads me to the third point, that the model works on strengths, not on weaknesses. The university experience of a great many teachers is an experience that focuses on weaknesses rather than on strengths. When the professor and the teacher come into contact, the teacher seems to lack the theoretical, and the professor the practical, but since the professor is in a position of authority it is the teacher who seems deficient, not the professor, at least in the public discussion. In the National Writing Project program, however, the teachers are teaching other teachers by using their strengths, by using strategies and methods and lessons which have been proven successful within their own classrooms: someone has been able to write better because of the use of these strategies. Further, in their writing, the participants are working with the kinds of topics they want to be working with, writing about what they know, and expressing things that they have wanted to express; again the conditions for strong writing, for vivid expressive writing, are present, and the program is building on strengths. Often an individual in this situation will perform better than he knew he could.

The strengths the model builds on are those of school teachers rather than those of university professors. Indeed, the site of inservice and even pre-service instruction is increasingly the school as opposed to the university. School districts now commonly grant professional growth credit for promotion on the salary scale to teachers in district-sponsored inservice programs which are completely independent of the university. This school-based training is efficient, involves less hassle, and is less likely to substitute university needs and perspective for teacher needs and perspectives. The key features which make the writing projects successful, however, may not survive such modification. Administrators, motivated by the opportunity to save money, by the opportunity to exclude outside influences, and by the opportunity to centralize control over staff and the identification of excellence, are not particularly concerned about the strengths of the model—being unwilling generally to transfer authority to teachers, to trust diversity, and to place the mission of the institution above the exercise of their own authority.

The strength of the BAWP model, as the model has been implemented in Nebraska, has been that it builds on strength, is very practical, and is teacher-centered. The last seems to have been most important, or at least it is useful, in my view, for me and my colleagues in college and university to see it as such. Not the least of the utilities of the teacher-centeredness of the model is that it may allow us to avoid our own obsolescence in the inservice and preservice education of teachers, and to take advantage of a model that fosters cooperation among public schools, universities, and governmental agencies, as a natural aspect of its design.

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