from Bill Strong

My mission at Tom Newkirk’s New Hampshire Writing Project grew out of Tom’s 1983 critique of the NWP model in *English Education*, “Is the Bay Area Model the Answer?” In that essay, Tom contended that because of the “justifiable euphoria about the success of the National Writing Project,” many of its most basic assumptions had not been examined critically. He then laid out five areas of difference between NWP Institutes and alternative models in New Hampshire and Vermont.

National Writing Project:

1. Teachers write during workshops, putting themselves in the role of students. However, the self-chosen writing is usually done outside the Institute hours.

2. Much of the Institute is devoted to teacher presentations. Participants are expected to be experts in composition teaching; however, many of them are not.

3. Teachers attend workshops at all grade levels. In theory, such a format breaks down grade level barriers, shows how basic teaching techniques apply at all levels, and helps future TCs adapt to diverse audiences.

4. The Institute does not impose a single theoretical model but allows for the sharing of the “best teaching practices”—a kind of “open-minded pragmatism.”

5. A major post-Institute goal is to set up workshops and courses where TCs can work with other teachers, sharing their expertise.

New Hampshire/Vermont Programs:

1. Virtually all of the writing is self-chosen, with about ninety minutes of each Institute day being given over to writing time.

2. Instruction in teaching methods is presented in a course format and directed by either an experienced teacher or a university professor with extensive teacher-training experience.

3. Teachers are grouped by grade level (K-2, 3-6, 7-9, 10-12) for sessions dealing with writing instruction. Theoretically, each group addresses specific concerns “in greater depth” than in NWP programs.

4. The Institute works explicitly from theories of the writing process developed by Moffett, Elbow, and Murray at the secondary level and by Donald Graves at the elementary level.

5. A major post-Institute goal is to provide follow-up support—regular meetings plus classroom visits by Project staff for further instruction.

Tom’s essay pointed to a basic paradox in the NWP model: that the strengths of a bottom up approach to teacher education, drawing upon the expertise of participants for content instruction, might also be its Achilles heel. His alternative was a model based on the assumption that teachers’ needs were better served by freeing up large amounts of time for self-sponsored writing (with conferencing) and by putting instruction in the hands of teachers (or teacher-trainers) of proven ability.

For me, differences between the NWP model of teachers teaching teachers and the program in New Hampshire were evident from the first day out. NHWP is essentially an open Institute and not one designed explicitly to transform teachers’ perceptions of their own professional power. Teachers pay their own way and expect to be hard-working students; instructors, in turn, understand their traditional roles. Because NHWP participants do not present workshops to each other during the Institute, there is no real expectation that they will collaborate to reform the system from the inside out.

Two Groups

All NHWP teachers were assigned to two kinds of groups for the Institute. The first was a writing group that met twice a day, from 9:00-10:15 and from 1:00-3:00 daily; this group consisted of teachers from all grade levels. The second was a teaching writing group that met from 10:30-12:00 daily; this group consisted of teachers from similar grade levels (primary, intermediate, ms/jh, hs/college). Wednesday afternoons were a respite from Academe.

As one of seven NHWP instructors, I ran both kinds of groups. The other instructors were top New Hampshire teachers who had worked with NHWP over the years. These were people deeply committed to the program and, not incidentally, to Tom. We worked as a loose-knit Institute team, meeting regularly for lunch to share ideas and discuss day-to-day scheduling issues.

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To provide a theory base for the Institute, NHWP brought all participants together during the second week for a series of mid-morning lectures by New Hampshire luminaries—among them, Don Graves, Jane Hansen, Don Murray, and Tom Newkirk. These talks were all first-rate, though not really tied to each other or to any explicit overall framework. It was in these presentations, mainly, that the Institute’s political message—one emphasizing self-sponsored writing, integration of reading and writing, and teacher-as-researcher—began to resonate.

While the lectures created a spine for the program, I would have to say that NHWP felt to me less theoretically coherent than dozens of NWP sites I have visited. There were no “core” readings for the Institute, for example, and hence no occasions when a single issue was discussed and debated by all groups. The daily newsletter did not deal with burning issues on the minds of teachers. Working against such discussions were several factors—among them, the sheer size of NHWP, the wide range of participant abilities, the short time span for the program, and the separation of teachers by grade levels.

On the other hand, it was also clear that NHWP put steadier emphasis on teacher writing than do typical NWP sites. Teachers worked in response groups, of course; but, at the same time, instructors were conferencing continually with individuals about writing. In this sense, the influence of Graves and Murray permeated the very structure of the Institute. The culmination of each week’s work with writing was a kind of read-around day, with participants in each writing group (about eighteen people) sharing their finished work aloud, much like the NWP end-of-Institute experience.

### Read-Around Days

NHWP really “came together” on these Friday read-around days. Why? Because each occasion provided both context and motivation for work on revision. Not surprisingly, participants completed each week with feelings of real satisfaction, having drafted, revised, and edited in preparation for sharing with the larger group. (At the end-of-Institute celebration, a person or two from each of the seven writing groups shared a best piece aloud; a collection of participant writing was published by NHWP after the Institute’s close.)

As noted above, the work on writing instruction was targeted more toward specific grade levels than is typical at NWP sites. Mostly, this seemed to be a read-and-discuss experience for participants, with relatively little emphasis on modeling of teaching practices because of time constraints. Such a format would probably seem very “instructor-centered” to most NWP directors; nevertheless, NHWP participants did like the focus on a narrow range of grade levels and felt comfortable sharing their teaching concerns and various approaches.

Although NHWP bills itself as a five-day-a-week program, attention shifted on Wednesday afternoons to less academic, more social pursuits—among them, pursuit of the perfect lobster. I attended these mid-week festivities with a strict concern for my Mission Objectives, always remaining alert to issues of NWP interest. It was over steamed clams that I learned why Tom eschews teacher workshops as part of the Institute program.

On the basis of his experience, Tom believes that presentations are not the most effective way for participants to share teaching ideas; moreover, he worries about the quality of some workshops. The real goal of these teachers, he said, was to become more effective in the classroom. In an Institute, then, why waste the time of both presenters and audience? Why not focus on the problem at hand, the teaching of writing, and help teachers learn to do it better? Tom believes that teacher workshops drain time away from other worthy activities—like reading and writing—and hold the Institute schedule hostage.

I had to agree with Tom’s point about schedules sometimes being held hostage. So I described to him how the Utah plan divides an Institute’s teachers into two groups of twelve for presentations, with each group monitored by one of the Institute’s site directors. In this arrangement, each participant presents to half the Institute, freeing up about sixteen hours for other kinds of activities. An additional benefit is that apprehensive teachers find it far less threatening than the traditional NWP model. To his credit, Tom saw the Utah plan as a step in the right direction.

As for Tom’s concern about less-than-expert teacher presenters, I tried to explain how many NWP site directors work with participants before, during, and after the Institute to make sure that workshops are well-planned and thoughtfully evaluated. If the goal is to prepare effective classroom teachers, I asked, wasn’t conferencing about the teaching of writing (NWP) as valid an approach as conferencing about writing itself (NWP)? Wasn’t it possible that the demands of making a presentation might act as a kind of personal catalyst for integrating theory and practice? In thus defending the NWP model, I finally had to be true to my personal experience. We are what we have done.

Does the NHWP model work? In my opinion, the answer has to be yes. Many teachers told me they liked its structure and felt that their time and money were well spent; and just yesterday two NHWP teachers wrote to describe exciting
things happening in their schools, including writing among teachers. Whether NHWP would be as successful elsewhere remains an open question, of course. The program's continuing success owes at least something to its superstar faculty as well as to the strong infrastructure for literacy in and around Durham.

How well does NHWP work? My sense was that NHWP was less intimate than many NWP sites but every bit as fun. Part of this difference in intensity was surely a function of size; but part of it probably resulted from the fact that teachers were participants in an Institute, not owners of it. This is hardly to diminish the excellence of the program in New Hampshire, of course. It is simply to say that NHWP works differently from NWP sites in pursuit of somewhat different ends.

What can NWP learn from NHWP? The main lesson, I think, is that more attention to conferencing and to end-of-the-week read-around days may be worth considering. Such a shift in emphasis would parallel instructional patterns in many classrooms, particularly at the elementary level. There are dangers in appropriating teacher texts, of course, but presumably NWP directors are alert to such pitfalls. To free up time for read-around days, NWP sites might adopt some version of Utah's split schedule for teacher presentations.

In the end, then, I came away from my Mission Assignment in New Hampshire not only with a taste for steamed clams and lobster but also with a clearer sense of what the National Writing Project is all about. The change was good for me. I came to see anew how NWP is as much about teacher empowerment as it is about the teaching and learning of writing.

References


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