Last May the California Writing Project met in Sacramento, CA, to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The keynote speaker on that occasion was Sheridan Blau, director of California's South Coast Writing Project and former President of the National Council of Teachers of English. Sheridan has been immersed in the writing project since its beginning, so he was the ideal choice to reiterate for those assembled the writing project's basic principles. For readers less familiar with what the NWP stands for, this piece, which serves as a tribute to writing project founder Jim Gray, should prove a valuable introduction. A version of Blau's speech will appear in a book Gray is writing on the history of the writing project, to be published by NWP in the year 2000.

The Only New Thing Under the Sun

"...there is no new thing under the sun," says Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes. And then he asks, "Is there any new thing whereof it may be said. See, this is new?" His answer: "It hath been already of old time" (Eccl. 1, 9-10).

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes has been tested by 25 or 30 centuries of human experience and found to be largely true for every generation. But in our time what may seem to be the truest of its maxims has been challenged by our own experience as members of the California Writing Project community. For there does seem to be one new thing under the sun and that new thing is the writing project. And what is fundamentally new about it, new in the history of education and in the history of efforts to improve classroom teaching, is the essential model of professional development that was envisioned by James Gray in its founding at UC Berkeley in 1974. Jim's vision, his radically new insight and the foundational principle of the Bay Area, California and National Writing Projects, was the idea that the answers to the most serious academic problems that beset schools and classrooms can be found in the expertise of experienced classroom teachers themselves. What experienced classroom teachers know, he insisted, is all the curriculum one needs for an effective professional development program.

It was a new and shocking idea and it has not yet been fully understood in most precincts of the academic community. It is an idea that runs so much against the grain of conventional thinking about schools and teachers that many newer sites of the National Writing Project struggle for years to get it right. And when applications for federal funding through a National Writing Project grant are unsuccessful, more often than not they are unsuccessful because they fail to demonstrate an understanding of this first principle of the National Writing Project model.

Let me try to state the principle more fully and accurately: it is that the most reliable and credible solutions to the problems of learning and teaching that face classroom teachers and their students are to be found in the reservoir of wisdom and practical knowledge that is constituted by the collective knowledge in the possession of experienced and successful classroom teachers themselves. Thus the writing project looks to experienced and successful classroom teachers as the best resource available to the educational community for solving the academic problems that trouble us. Teachers are, in other words, not seen as a source of the problem but as the principal resource for the solution.

What Follows from Recognizing the Expertise of Teachers

A number of corollary principles follow from this first principle of the writing project, and they yield the familiar litany of guidelines and principles for a National Writing Project site. These include:

- the axiom that the best teacher of teachers is another teacher
- the requirement that sites foster and honor teacher leadership, and
- the custom of investing site leadership in a team that typically includes a university faculty member and a K-12 classroom teacher as co-directors.

Our first principle also leads logically and logistically to a few closely related principles and practices that have become cultural markers and even funding requirements of writing project sites and that also enrich and secure the authority of classroom teachers. First, there is the principle that while experienced classroom teachers are repositories of authoritative professional knowledge on what works in classrooms, they are also, as exemplary teachers, members of a profession and
model learners for their students and for each other. As model learners, writing project teachers commit themselves in Summer Institutes first to function as writers, producing and responding to each other's work in progress and taking some pieces from incubation to publication. In this context, teachers examine the writing process and the perils and challenges of writing from the inside, with themselves as experimental subjects, interrogating in the experiment their own assumptions about writing and learning to write, and exploring the most useful ways to respond to writing.

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As model students and professionals, these teachers will also be inclined to reflect on, challenge, and enhance whatever they claim as their professional knowledge. What this means in practice is that writing project Fellows are expected to talk about and write about what they know and do in their teaching and (as a requirement for participation in a Summer Institute and beyond) conduct workshops or presentations for their colleagues, demonstrating some successful and principled approach to teaching composition or critical literacy. Through writing about their teaching and preparing for presentations that frame their practices within a rationale or theory, writing project teachers clarify and articulate their instructional goals both to themselves as well as to their colleagues. By creating teacher demonstrations of their best practice, teachers make their knowledge visible and open avenues for interrogation and critical reflection. And such questioning and self-examination — as every teacher of writing knows — inevitably lead to the refinement or revision of what is known.

It also follows that if writing project teachers are model learners and professionals who challenge and reflect on their knowledge and share it with colleagues through their writing and presentations, they will also challenge and reflect and seek to refine and validate their knowledge by examining it in the context of the discourse of the larger professional community, which means at least becoming familiar with the seminal body of theory and research in their field. This practice of including opportunities to read and discuss seminal works in the professional literature of the fields of composition and literacy studies is standard for writing project sites and a component of what the National Writing Project grant application reviewers refer to as the NWP model.

Many sites enrich their discussions of seminal readings and enlarge their participation in the discourse of the profession by inviting leading scholars and theoreticians to serve as guest consultants for a day or more in their Summer Institutes. The work of writers like Peter Elbow, Bonnie Sunstein, Miles Myers, and the late James Moffett may be better known to classroom teachers through presentations at writing project sites than it is through published essays and books — better known, that is, in the sense of being more widely known, but perhaps also in the sense of being more deeply understood.

**Problematic Issues and the Spirit of the WP Model**

Not surprisingly, however, presentations by such eminent figures in our field — even by the same figures whose works we read during a Summer Institute — are not a feature of the writing project model, though they are not a violation either. Though guest lecturers appear at many mature and respected writing project sites (including my own), the practice remains a problematic one insofar as it threatens to obscure the intellectual authority and value of the expertise brought to a Summer Institute by the participating teachers themselves.
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Discussions of when and whether the use of guest consultants in a Summer Institute does or doesn’t compromise the spirit of the writing project model sometimes take on the character of moral or ethical discourse and resemble the discourse of casuistry in the 17th century, or of ethical criticism or psychotherapy today, where discussion will focus on such questions as when fiscal prudence or frugality becomes the sin of avarice or when courage becomes recklessness, or when a healthy appetite and appreciation of food becomes gluttony or an eating disorder. We ask ourselves and each other, in other words, when the use of guest scholars in the case of a particular Summer Institute, might lead to the obscuration or marginalization of the expertise of participating teachers and when, on the other hand, it serves to enhance and publicly authorize the expertise of those same teachers.

Such discussions around problematic activities sponsored by writing project sites frequently show us how the model envisioned by Jim Gray is as much a spiritual or intellectual model as it is a set of particular practices. In fact, many of the most heated debates I have participated in, witnessed and heard about in reviews of writing project site funding applications are debates over whether and to what extent particular practices or their absence signify that a site enacts or violates or fails to enact the spirit or principles of the writing project model — the model is recognized as most essentially a model of principles, one that is subject to change and development in practices, in the interest of more fully actualizing the spirit that informs the model.

But although what is essential to the writing project model is its spirit or principles rather than its practices, I hasten to add that like all spiritual disciplines the spirit or principles of the writing project model can be known only through its practices, and that the practices traditionally and conventionally associated with the writing project model are the most reliable guide to discovering and sustaining its spirit. Any new writing project director would therefore be well-advised to enact all of the practices that are specified in the model that we have inherited from Jim Gray and the Bay Area Writing Project, even if the spirit behind those practices is not understood. For it frequently requires obedient adherence over time to the practices that instantiate the writing project model before the directors and teacher-leaders of a writing project site discover for themselves the meaning and importance of those practices.

Beyond the Summer Institute: The Creation of Learning Communities

My account of what Jim Gray created will be misleading, however, if I seem to be describing a program that merely prescribes how to conduct a Summer Institute. On the contrary, the writing project that has grown from Jim’s conception into some 161 sites nationwide includes Summer Institutes virtually everywhere, but also includes an extensive school-based inservice program through which writing project summer Fellows share their expertise with a wider community of colleagues, and a constellation of academic-year programs for veterans of Summer Institutes, which is known as the Continuation or Continuity Program.

The idea that teachers might be the principal contributors to the professional learning of their colleagues might have been a new and difficult one for the educational community to assimilate, but what the teachers of writing project sites have created for themselves, building on their own professionalism and expertise, has to have been a surprise even to our visionary founder. Could it be that Jim Gray — with all his faith in classroom teachers, and blessed as he was with colleagues in his home site like Miles Myers, and Mary K. Healy, and Mary Ann Smith, and Cap Lavin, and Rebekah Caplan, and Jane Juska, and Bob Tierney, and Ruby Bernstein — legendary names in our profession — could even Jim have imagined what would come out of the feature of the model that was labeled as the Continuity Program, a feature that most of us in the early years of the Project thought of merely as some additional follow-up meetings during the academic year to keep our Project teachers updated and well-informed — Saturday Workshops in BAWP and weekday “Renewal Meetings” at my own site at UC Santa Barbara, for example.

Who would have imagined that virtually all mature writing project sites throughout the country would typically discover that much of the most important work of a writing project takes place not in Summer Institutes but in the multitude of teacher-led and teacher-initiated programs that sites now list in their annual reports as activities constituting their Continuity Program. I’m talking about teacher-research groups, case-study groups, special interest groups, and a multitude of book clubs and writing groups. Such groups might have 5 or 50
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writing project Fellows as members and might meet quarterly or monthly or more often than that. Mary Ann Smith belongs to a BAWP writing group that has been meeting monthly for over twenty years. Bob Tierney, who has retired to the now famous (because he is there) distant outpost of Poker Bar, drives seven hours each way every month to keep attending that writing group.

At my site a group of 12 teachers known as the SCWriP Teachers Collaborative has functioned as a combined writing group, book club, teacher-research group, and support group, meeting monthly for 12 years, acting as the midwife to several published articles, numerous workshop and conference presentations, experimental approaches to solving refractory teaching problems, and one important and nationally influential book. One of its members moved to Illinois for a couple of years and continued attending meetings by phone. Some meetings, unfortunately, had to be conducted in the hospital room of a member whose final thoughts and deathbed journal entries were a tribute to the personal and professional importance of her group and the writing they had inspired and influenced.

Many writing project sites — most mature sites — also conduct advanced institutes in summers or during the school year for veterans of Invitational Summer Institutes. A dozen sites have conducted advanced institutes in literature. Many have conducted specialized institutes in writing across the curriculum, or working with struggling readers, or multicultural literature, or technology, or bilingual language arts teaching. Special interest groups at my site and at others have been responsible for organizing important initiatives and special projects which became big-budget programs under the sponsorship of the Project — including young writers camps, parent projects, tutoring programs, and programs designed to provide access to higher education for historically under-represented populations of students.

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What is most important about the Continuity Program — and this I think is what Jim Gray and Miles Myers and others in the founding group did anticipate — is that it made each writing project site the locus for an ongoing and active community of colleagues, engaged in their own continuing professional development — a community that functions, in other words, as a learning community and a realization of the kind of community of scholars that the university has historically aspired to become but in its modern bureaucratised form has rarely managed to sustain, except in richly endowed specialized institutes and think-tanks. That is to say, the writing project is a site for continuing professional collaboration and inquiry, where learning is nurtured and valued, and where knowledge is as much produced as consumed, without the distinction raised by hierarchies of power (such as those that separate administrators, teachers, students), without bureaucratic or economic structures of reward or advancement. Learning is nurtured, shared, and disseminated among colleagues for its own sake and for the satisfaction of those who learn and become thereby more effective practitioners of their profession.

Learning Communities and the Culture of Schools

The intellectual power, activity, and productivity unleashed in writing project Continuity Programs — programs offering no financial incentives or extrinsic rewards for teacher-participants — is, I believe, unprecedented in the history of education and resists easy explanation. One possible explanation is that exemplary teachers are by definition exemplary learners and are therefore eager to share and explore ideas with a hunger that cannot be satisfied in any five-week Summer Institute. Once teachers begin to taste the intellectual pleasures of working with colleagues in a genuine community of learners, they aren’t willing to return to a professional life that lacks such satisfactions.

Schools, however, for a variety of cultural and sociological reasons, are notoriously anti-intellectual places and have traditionally possessed no institutionalized mechanisms for nurturing or sustaining communities of teachers who wish to explore pedagogical and substantive ideas. So writing project teachers have created structures for continuing such work beyond the summer and for all the days of their professional lives.
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In the meantime, writing projects and their Fellows appear to be changing the culture of schools to make schools themselves more hospitable contexts for groups of teachers who want to form communities of learners with their colleagues. In fact, it now seems evident that writing project sites have had a significant impact on the culture of schools in their service areas by introducing into the schools the same sorts of inquiry groups, case-study groups, and teacher-research groups that have operated so successfully at writing project sites outside the sponsorship of schools.

Just as importantly, the writing project and its Fellows are changing the culture of schools in a parallel way for students. Having experienced what it means to learn in a community of learners, teachers are inclined to count such learning as more authoritative and authentic than any other and to think of such learning as the proper aim of instruction. They therefore become determined to turn their own classrooms into learning communities that will function like a writing project, where respect for the intelligence of every learner is the starting place for all activity, and where all learners are expected and required to take responsibility for their own learning as well as for assisting others to learn — a community where learning entails the production of knowledge as well as its reception and where knowledge is always seen as provisional and subject to challenge and refinement.

If that description sounds like everybody’s definition of a model classroom, it is surely not every student’s experience of classroom learning. Few of us have had any sustained experience of learning in such a community during our years as students in classrooms, and all of us know something of how difficult it must be to translate such an ideal for a classroom into the classrooms we actually inhabit in schools. Classrooms do not typically include 20-25 students carefully selected as exemplary teachers and learners and they do not consist of adults whose professional lives have committed them to solving the very problems that define the curriculum.

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Still, it is true that all good teachers find some ways to foster authentic and engaged learning in their classrooms some of the time. And the surest methods or strategies or programs for instruction that are most likely, most often, to produce such learning are usually those that Fellows of a writing project site demonstrate to each other and to their colleagues in inservice programs. What the writing project provides more importantly than these strategies and programs of instruction, however, is an experience for teachers in a model community of learners, a model that works so well for most of the teachers who experience it, that they spend the rest of their professional lives trying to create some version of it in their classrooms, where the conditions of membership and daily life do not usually conspire to help them.

A cynic might say that the writing project is so unlike a classroom that the experience it provides has no relevance to the life world of the school. But good teachers are not cynics — at least not about their teaching. It is a standing joke among writing project teachers, many of whom are veterans of thirty or more years of teaching, that we continue to teach every year with equal anticipation because we are hoping to finally get it right. Which does not for a moment imply that for thirty years we have gotten it wrong. Rather, it speaks to our recognition of the difficulty that teaching presents to every teacher who continues to care about students and the challenges that each student and classroom present to us anew.

It is the case, I believe, that the writing project is and is not like our classrooms. It bears the same relationship to our classrooms, I would propose, as the Garden of Eden bears to the world we live in. We need a vision of Paradise, and are blessed through the writing project with an actual experience of such a learning Paradise, in order to set worthwhile goals and ideals for ourselves in the fallen world we actually inhabit. Just as importantly, the writing project, like the Garden of Eden, is just like the world we inhabit in our everyday working lives, in the sense that it remains vulnerable to the same threats and temptations to give up our task of learning either to adopt intellectually reductive but bureaucratically convenient answers to complex questions or to embrace a vision of hopelessness rather than possibility. If the
Garden of Eden were not spiritually very much like the world we live in, Adam and Eve would never have been tempted and would never have been able to fall.

**True Learning and False Knowledge**

Significantly, I think, the principal temptation placed by God in the Garden of Eden is the temptation of knowledge, represented by the tree of knowledge and the tempting fruit hanging from its branches. And it remains the case that knowledge is the temptation we are obliged to resist and are assisted in resisting through the culture of the writing project. Knowledge is a temptation for us as it was for Eve in the Garden of Eden when it is offered to us as a substitute for learning. Eve falls intellectually before she succumbs to the temptation of the fruit, when she decides (as we see in Milton’s inspired account of God’s justice) that her ignorance renders her inferior to her husband and insufficient to endure the condition of her life of insecure happiness in the Garden — a life that is marked at almost every moment by opportunities to learn. Indeed, she is promised that if she remains obedient to the injunction against the knowledge represented by the fruit, she will grow in learning to the point where she will be able to move easily between the Garden and heaven itself.

But how can knowledge be a sin and how can Eve be faulted by divine justice for wanting knowledge? The answer is that knowledge is a sin when it is false knowledge, and it is always false knowledge when it is acquired without learning.

And how can you obtain knowledge without learning? You get it whenever you take as your knowledge the fruits of learning that you have not earned through your own learning experience. When, for example, you take somebody else’s interpretation of a text as your own. When you take and reproduce as an answer to a problem a statement or procedure you have not understood for yourself. These are temptations because what they offer — if you take them as your knowledge — is a false knowledge, false in the sense that they do not derive from your experience as a learner and can only be possessed the way you possess objects or material wealth as something to display as a token of your status or value. And once your knowledge becomes the token of your value, it also becomes a stolen possession you are unwilling to surrender, and as such it becomes an obstacle to further learning. Thus we have two characteristics of false knowledge. First, it is knowledge that is false in the sense that it has not been acquired through learning, and it is false in the sense that it becomes an obstacle to further learning.

We are most inclined to use knowledge as a token of our value, moreover, when we have acquired it by devaluing ourselves in the act of betrayal against ourselves that we commit whenever we make the decision that we cannot tolerate the insecurity or sense of powerlessness we feel in not having definitive answers to the questions that puzzle and vex us. Our true power resides, however, in what we can mistakenly regard as our powerlessness, which is to say in our power to learn. For it is as learners that we express and manifest our most distinctive human quality as beings who grow and continue to grow intellectually and spiritually. The incapacity to learn, the refusal to change intellectually are the singular marks of those we classify as fools or mentally ill. And the attempt to prematurely take possession of knowledge that one has not earned through the slow but reliable process of growth and learning defines the sin of our first parents and the Faustian bargain with the devil.

For 25 years Jim Gray has been vigilant in warning the sites of the National Writing Project against embracing any fashionable theory of learning or teaching or any instructional reform — however promising or supported by research and theory — which might foreclose on alternative approaches and other answers put forward by a successful classroom teacher.

These literary and theological speculations, which may seem to mark a digression in my meditation on what we owe to James Gray and to the Bay Area Writing Project, are nevertheless relevant to the present occasion because they point to the purity of the writing project model as a model for learning even in the face of pressures to relinquish learning for the false gratifica—

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community. As students develop their proficiency with written language in the context and environment of writing workshop, they are concurrently developing skills that will facilitate their full and informed participation in society.

References


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tions that come with claims of premature knowing. For 25 years Jim Gray has been vigilant in warning the California Writing Project and sites of the National Writing Project against embracing any fashionable theory of learning or teaching or any instructional reform — however promising or supported by research and theory — which might foreclose on alternative approaches and other answers put forward by a successful classroom teacher.

Even those of us who are intellectually committed to the writing project and who have taken it upon ourselves to articulate a theory for the model and practices that define the writing project have found Jim indifferent or hostile to any theoretical label we might be inclined to propose as a way of identifying what approach the writing project takes to improving the teaching of writing in schools. From Jim Gray’s perspective — and it is a perspective we must be reminded of whenever we are inclined to waver from it — no label or school of thought can be applied to the writing project, if it threatens to make the Project less hospitable to the ideas and experience of some successful teacher whose practice is inconsistent with the labeled principles. The writing project has therefore assiduously refused to embrace such attractive and widely respected movements or pedagogical stances as constructivism or whole language, or critical pedagogy, or literature-based instruction. We must not become proponents of any of these, Jim would insist, if that might suggest that we are not open to whatever might represent its opposite and might be brought into our community by an experienced and thoughtful classroom teacher. For Jim Gray and those of us who remain faithful to the writing project model, the Project remains aggressively agnostic with respect to any approach that may be offered for school reform or instructional improvement, and yet militantly orthodox in its faith, first, in the capacity of teachers to continue learning from their own experience and from the wisdom of peers and, then, in the ultimate authority of teachers to determine for themselves what works and doesn’t work in their own classrooms.

Fortunately, Jim has not allowed his retirement to remove him from the discourse of our community and he resides near at hand to advise and chastise us as we continue to define and refine the work of the writing project. He serves as a mentor to all of us, and we who have been privileged to work with Jim as site directors and Fellows of CWP sites remain, in our best professional moments, his protégés.

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