Do Workshops Work?

by Kathleen O'Shaughnessy

Is finding one's own way the essence of teacher empowerment? Yes but it's complex, or so argues Kathleen O'Shaughnessy in this reflection on working with a group of "struggling but brave elementary teachers." As codirector of the NWP of Acadia, a writing project site based in Lafayette, Louisiana, O'Shaughnessy came to work with these teachers as part of Project Outreach, a national network of eighteen writing project sites sponsored by DeWitt Wallace—Reader's Digest Fund. In Project Outreach, teacher leaders from member sites struggled bravely, too, confronting complex issues of equity, diversity, and access as they worked to better support and involve colleagues from low-income districts. Her account is dedicated to "all the wise and gifted teachers who manage to find their own ways in spite of it all."

—Elyse Eidman-Aadahl
Director, Project Outreach

The only good thing I can say about my sense of direction is that it's consistent. Ask me which way to turn or where something is, and I will always be wrong. That's why I don't go running when I'm away from home anymore. The last time I tried, I was in London. In the taxi from the airport, I'd noticed a lush green park near my hotel, so on my first morning after jet lag, I set out for a jog. But the park wasn't where I had left it. I went a little farther, tried a few different streets, and still no park. Then I realized I'd only lost the park, but my hotel as well. I tried not to get panicky, or at least not to look panicky, but I was well and truly lost. I kept on the move, hoping at every corner to find one of those charming, unflappable bobbies you see in British sitcoms, but there were none. (Maybe they were all in the park.) My heartbeat was above its target zone for aerobic training but from fear rather than healthy exertion. Finally, I found a man opening his newspaper. When I asked him, breathlessly, if he might possibly know where my hotel was, he looked perplexed and pointed over my shoulder. I turned around and there, almost directly across the street from where we stood, was my hotel. I was very grateful, terribly embarrassed, and angry that I'd allowed my fear to cheat me out of the triumph of finding my own way.

I often relive this experience when I present workshops for teachers, but now I'm the kind stranger pointing the way and they're the frightened jogger, disconcerted by unfamiliar territory, afraid of making a wrong turn, embarrassed to ask for help but desperately grateful when it's offered, and unaware of the feeling of power and freedom that comes with finding one's own way. A teacher who can find her own way knows her territory — her students, her school culture, her understanding about how kids learn — as well as she knows the neighborhood she grew up in. And more importantly, she knows she knows it.

Finding one's own way is the essence of teacher empowerment. It's the necessary prerequisite for becoming a reflective practitioner. It's what distinguishes the National Writing Project model from the dizzying parade of prepackaged, teacher-proof programs our school districts view as staff development, and it's the fundamental goal of every inservice session I conduct. But just how successful am I with those teachers who only connect with me in a limited number of sessions, who don't go on to participate in a summer institute, who comprise the majority of teachers I come in contact with?

My relationship with them is so much more complicated than it appears on the surface. I arrive at a workshop immersed in the teachers teaching teachers model, fascinated with the process of inquiry, and in love with teacher stories. With all that in my head, I often forget that my audience arrives with a completely different picture in theirs. For them, inservice training may mean a series of breakout sessions including one in which a sales rep from a textbook company shows them how to use their newly adopted basal series. Of course, anyone who can read can do this with no training at all since the teacher's every thought is scripted for her in the margins of the teacher's edition. Usually the speaker will also pull out all the shiny things — color transparencies, cassettes, videos — from the shiny box which the district probably didn't buy because all the money went for new workbooks. Or they may remember being herded, along with every other teacher and all the administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and custodians from the district, into the coliseum that usually hosts rodeos and college basketball games to be magically transformed by a well-paid motivational speaker who manipulates his audience's
emotions as smoothly as he manages his overhead projector — but never says one specific thing about how to teach anything any better. Caught between our conflicting paradigms, I struggle with my role. I want to do more than silently point the way but less than take teachers' hands and walk them all the way to their destinations. The teachers I meet have too many people holding their hands already. I don't want to be just another workshop leader with just another big fat handout of reproducible stuff to cram into an already overcrowded and disjointed teaching day. It worries me that they may go back to their classrooms and try to be me the way I tried to be Nanci Atwell after I read In the Middle for the first time. I learned then that cloning can never work as a staff development technique.

I teach eighth-grade language arts in Louisiana — the state whose legislature addressed the public's outcry about plummeting test scores and escalating school violence by passing a law requiring students in grades K-5 to say ma'am and sir to their teachers. I live and work in the heart of the Cajun part of the state, where we're known for our warmth, our food and our joie de vivre, but not for our academic achievements. Crawfish farmers and offshore oil field workers, many without high school diplomas, make lots more money than teachers, and their kids come to school knowing that. When a new teacher goes for a job interview, she is far more likely to be asked, "Who's your mama?" than "What professional literature have you read lately?" I love my state. I love the land, the culture, and the pace of life. But it is a struggle to be an educator where tourists are more treasured than teachers and state dollars dwindle to dimes before they reach our schools.

Of course, that struggle is not unique to Louisiana. Teaching is and always will be hard regardless of the circumstances. Questions about what to teach and how to teach it never seem to have once-and-for-all answers. The search for those answers is what drove me to mimic Nanci Atwell; it's what led me to the National Writing Project, and it's what I feel most competent to share with the teachers who attend my workshops. During my eight-year affiliation with the National Writing Project of Acadiana, I've presented more workshops than I can count, and in the past year or so I've been wrestling with a different struggle. This one is not so comfortable to talk about, but I suspect I'm not the only teacher consultant who feels it. It's the struggle not to become exactly what I say I despise — a one-way conveyor of tidy, simplistic answers to intensely complicated questions. When a room full of teachers is looking at me, seeing me as this year's expert, expecting me to show them the way, hoping this year it will finally be the right way, it's too easy to forget that I get lost sometimes too. Their paradigm is a seductive one when I'm the one on the other side of the overhead projector, but it never will empower teachers; it never will foster the development of teacher leaders. I knew that once but I almost forgot it until a group of struggling but brave elementary teachers in Church Point, Louisiana pointed me back in the right direction.

Our writing project site was one of eighteen from the national network to participate in Project Outreach, an effort funded by a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Its goals were to investigate the impact each writing project site has had on its educational
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community, to make writing project services more accessible to teachers and students in areas with high levels of poverty, to foster the development of teacher leaders, and to increase diversity among those leaders. The Project Outreach teams from each of the sixteen sites were free to develop whatever types of programs they felt would be the most effective for their particular circumstances.

One of the endeavors our Project Outreach team undertook was a yearlong staff development program at Church Point Elementary School. Church Point is a rural community of about 3,000 people, but the school district encompasses a large rural area surrounding the town, resulting in a large population (800 students in grades pre-kindergarten through five) for such a small town. Eighty-four percent of these students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In addition to the usual concern over low scores on standardized tests, the administrators at Church Point Elementary were also disturbed about some alarming statistics regarding their staff. Only 25% of the faculty lived in Church Point or the surrounding area; the rest drove in from larger towns or cities, many from Lafayette, nearly an hour’s drive away. The pay in Church Point’s district is fairly low compared to surrounding districts, so there is little incentive for teachers to maintain such a long commute. Consequently, Church Point Elementary routinely experiences a high turnover in staff. The year we began working with them, 18 of the 54 staff members were new teachers. With this discouraging fact in mind, the administration of the school struggled to find ways to keep teachers enthusiastic about their jobs and committed to the school.

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From its inception, we designed the Church Point project to be different from the traditional top-down model of staff development. First, no teachers were required to participate. Secondly, we advertised that each session would be interactive and hands-on; participants would not be sitting and taking notes but rather experiencing and experimenting with different classroom strategies. Finally, we asked the teachers who chose to participate to keep a journal throughout the project in which they discussed any new strategies they were trying, whether they viewed these as successes or failures, and any questions and concerns they had about their students’ developing literacy. The school’s curriculum coordinator, who was a member of the Project Outreach team, collected and read the journals once a month and summarized them for the rest of the team. The journals were intended to help the workshop leaders plan sessions based on the teachers’ needs and to introduce the teachers to the practice of keeping a professional journal as a means of continuing their professional growth on their own after the sessions ended.

The very first entries convinced us of the power of these journals as a tool for us as workshop leaders. How effective could we have been if we had not known from the start of the almost crippling fears and self-doubts many of these teachers expressed so honestly in their journals?

The first meeting for the writing project was great. It established a realization of why writing is not used more often in my classroom. My fear of it. I am so afraid that my students won’t leave my classroom with a knowledge of things like parts of speech, grammar rules, etc. I hope that through this workshop I will develop a confidence with writing myself so that I can pass this on to my students. 

I fear writing enormously. It has always been a great punishment for me to write. I hope these workshops help me overcome my great fear of writing.

I must say that writing has been the hardest subject to incorporate into the curriculum. I just felt like it took so much time and energy to teach all my students how to write something interesting enough to read. First of all I am extremely intimidated with teaching writing. I am not an author and I’ve always felt that my writing was not an appropriate model to follow.

How effective can any staff development program be if it doesn’t take into account the experiences and attitudes of the
participants? How often in the past have these or any teachers been asked what they know, what they want to know, or how they feel about the topic being presented to them? When these questions aren’t asked, the unspoken message is that teachers’ voices aren’t important. Teachers with years of experience, who’ve taught hundreds of children at a particular grade level, are left believing that what they know isn’t valuable, what they’ve observed and learned through trial and error doesn’t count. They aren’t the experts. The experts are the people who’ve left the classroom for higher paying, higher status positions and a teacher’s job is to effectively implement whatever programs the experts are currently promoting.

We tried to address the teachers’ doubts about their own writing and their students’ writing abilities. We demonstrated lots of fluency-building activities that would allow the teachers and their students to experience success and gain confidence. We went on to present specific teaching strategies, management strategies, and research. The journals soon began to document learning on the part of the teachers as well as their students.

I have just completed a lesson on capital, punctuation, & paragraph format. The kids wrote about their most prized possession. More importantly, however, I modeled for them my own paragraph. I then changed some things & rewrote it for them. As I reviewed it with them, I changed even more of my 2nd draft. This was so very helpful to them to see me, their teacher, make mistakes & change things even after the 2nd time I wrote it.

I tried “cubing” with the students this week. My objective was for the students to write a description using their senses. I held an apple in my hand and had students write descriptives for each sense (one at a time). I followed this by directing students to choose a writing format (poem, riddle, descriptive paragraph, how-to, narrative), use words from the sensory bank, and write. I was truly surprised with the results. I got things from “How to Make Applesauce” to precious alliteration poems. I will definitely use this strategy again.

As the project continued, the journals indicated that the teachers were making genuine efforts to incorporate activities from our workshops into their busy days. Uses of specific strategies and pieces of literature from the workshops were mentioned often. Though the teachers still relied heavily on their reading textbook series, they were willing to incorporate the new ideas and were often delighted with the results.

We had a “blast” this week writing. Students wrote their own “pourquoi” tale. We read the story “Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together” in reading this week. I read several other pourquoi written by Rudyard Kipling to the class. Students then wrote their own tales. We had a contest to see who could be the most creative. They did such a great job! Gregory’s entitled

“How the Pig’s Tale Got Curly” was so well done.

After reading the story “Going Green” we worked on persuasive writing. The goal was to write a letter to the editor of a student newspaper to convince other children that they can do something to “save our planet.” We did a prewriting activity as a class. We webbed the major problems—acid rain, air pollution, and land pollution—which were the 3 major sections of our story. We completed our web by listing possible solutions for these problems. Students then used this information to write their letters. I reminded them that you have to back up persuasion with fact, not just saying (in essence) please, please, please, which many students tend to do. I believe this activity was quite a success.

As early as October, some entries began to read like the notes of teacher researchers. Even when they reported disappointment with their students’ progress, they were forward-looking, questioning, and predicting.

This past week we’ve worked on narrative writing. We began with timelines as prewriting and then progressed through the writing process. Some students did well taking a piece all the way through. Some, however didn’t do much to change their first rough draft. We’ll have to work on this.

This week students completed a writing survey. As I glanced over these, I noticed my students’ attitudes toward
writing are as varied as the students themselves. I'm looking forward to the end of the year (for more than obvious reasons!) to see if any attitudes will change on the post survey.

Other entries demonstrated the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to talk to each other for support and professional collaboration. Teachers often mentioned other teachers in the project as sources of ideas and inspiration.

I learned a neat editing tip from Shirley C. It's called the round table. Each student gets different colored pencils or crayons. We sit in a circle and the teacher tells the students, after exchanging papers, to take a red pencil and circle all misspelled words. Then we exchange again and take a blue marker and underline all run-on sentences, and so forth. Kids love it! Pretty effective for recognizing that a first draft isn't good enough.

I must confess. I've been teaching isolated skills. This week we worked on abbreviations and using a, an, and the. I need a push to get back to writing. I'll have to go talk to Carolyn and Marlene to try to motivate myself.

These collaborations, though, were what they too often are for teachers — quick stolen moments during a ten-minute lunch hour or a frowned-upon conversation during bus duty. Even in our Project Outreach workshops, with all our good intentions to be different from and better than the inservices we have so often railed against, we didn't incorporate enough time for these teachers to discover what they already knew and to share it with their colleagues and with us.

The later entries showed that some of the teachers were starting to move beyond simply replacing their textbook's activities with the ones in our workshops and were beginning to reflect on their teaching practices in more general terms.

I am beginning to rethink my entire concept of teaching language. At the beginning of the school year I mapped out how I would sequence my language units. First I would teach parts of speech, then sentences, paragraphs, and then stories. It seemed like a logical sequence, building on previous skills. I have now come to the realization that I did an enormous injustice to my students. . . . I started thinking about the applicability of what I was teaching. The sole purpose of language is to communicate. I have students in my class who can make a noun possessive, but can't express a complete thought. I had discovered that what I was teaching was not helping my students to become better communicators. In reality, what I had done was increase boredom and frustration levels.

The prewriting activities that we have discussed during the Project Outreach sessions have been greatly beneficial. I used to ask the students to write without first preparing the students for the assignment. I suppose I thought they could just pull thoughts out of the air. I now see how difficult it must have been for them.

After the school year and the workshops ended, we read all the journals looking for evidence of our success, and we found it. The students of these teachers were reading more books and doing more writing, and many of the teachers were justifiably proud of themselves for a year of hard work.

This week I gathered writing samples to enter in the Young Author's Competition . . . This was the first year that I actually could go to students' writing folders to select the work. That's quite an achievement for me!

I have to say I'm proud of myself this week! I was truly a writing teacher.

It's exciting to see that some of our kindergartners are beginning to read and to write sentences. They get so tickled with themselves — it is a pure joy to witness.

The teachers at Church Point were bright, experienced, genuinely caring, and, after years of being told what to do, obedient. But obedience has its downside. Some entries, even from as late as March, suggested to me that the teachers had tried what we showed them in the workshops, not because they had decided for themselves that it was good practice, but because we, this year's experts, had shown it to them.

My shame is great because my intentions are good, but my availability of time isn't. . . . I've taken a step back from writing in my classroom. I am overwhelmed with Project READ, Project REAP, this and that — I'd love to just teach and throw out the
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gradebook, the curriculum. Wow! What fun that would be!

I returned to my classroom today anxious to teach writing the way I know I'm supposed to - the way Marie [the curriculum coordinator] did and spoke about at the workshop. But that's a big but. I'm really concerned about teaching language skills. I'm also worried about time constraints.

Clearly, these teachers had not yet become decision makers in their classrooms. They weren't making choices about what and how to teach based on observations of their students' development. They were simply following the models that had been presented to them — by us, by all the other workshops they'd attended, by the margins of their teachers' manuals, by their own elementary teachers. Instead of examining the options and choosing a practice that seemed best for their students and their circumstances, they were trying to do it all and were understandably overwhelmed in the process. It is terribly hard for any teacher who genuinely cares about doing a good job to let go of “teaching language skills” in the only way she's known unless she understands and believes in the reason for doing so. What's missing in these entries is the why that allows us to make significant changes in our practice.

I modeled the poem “If I Were in Charge of the World.” We made a big booklet. I struggled to find the significance in doing it, but one big thing I gave the students was total responsibility. They were forced to think all by themselves and follow directions all by themselves. They were eager to do the exercise because I incorporated art, something we hadn't done much of.

I am reading much more to the students this year than I ever did. I stop to explain the meanings of words and write them on the board. They really seem to enjoy the stories. I worry that the time I spend doing that is not accomplishing very much with many because they seem so far gone at this point. Still, they do seem to enjoy it.

Entries like these bothered me. I read and reread them and my disappointment grew. Why hadn't these teachers seen beneath the surface of the activities we'd demonstrated? We'd presented plenty of theory, shared lots of professional literature, given them time to think, even a new journal to write in. We had, in fact, changed everything about the demeaning and mind-numbing inservices from the past except for one thing — my faulty expectation that the workshops themselves would make a difference independent of the motivations, prior knowledge, and past experiences of the participants.

Seduced once again by the power of the overhead projector, I'd forgotten that the boxes of books, files of activities and journal articles, and crates of student work we'd carried to Church Point represented years of reading, thinking, talking, searching for answers. Years, not months. I have dog-eared the page of invitations on which Regie Routman says it takes years to transform one's practice, and I've reread that sentence countless times to comfort myself when I worry that I'm not as far along on my journey as I should be.

What the Church Point teachers still need, no workshop can give them. They need time and they need to discover their own reasons for making a change. No workshop will be transformative for a teacher who isn't looking for a new and better way. Some of them may never start that search, but many will and some already have. Unfortunately, the high rate of teacher turnover continues at Church Point Elementary. The year following our project, 21 new teachers were hired. Several of the participants in our project were among the departing faculty members, but it is our hope that we provided them and the ones who stayed with some tools and information that will point them in the right direction the next time they feel lost.

The journals were useful tools for both the teachers and the workshop presenters and accomplished the objectives we had for introducing them. But for me, they had other, unexpected effects. They made me examine more closely what my role and my expectations should be as a teacher consultant. They made me angry about attempts at staff development that insult my intelligence and ignore my experience. And they made me even more respectful of all the wise and gifted teachers I have met who manage to find their own ways in spite of it all.

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