Experiments in Reading and Writing

The New York City Writing Project at Work

Nancy Wilson

I knew there were no miracles. I'd seen teachers coax and cajole students to read the texts in front of them, seen them lift students' heads off desks and put pens into their hands. And yet, I'd seen classroom after classroom in which students and teachers were reading.

The following chapter has been excerpted from Nancy Wilson's monograph A Professional Community at Work: The New York City Writing Project at Theodore Roosevelt High School. This monograph documents a five-year collaboration between the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP, a program of the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College/CUNY) and an overcrowded, inner-city high school in the Bronx.

The collaboration is part of NYCWP's school-based program. The program was set in place in 1981 by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and continues today through the support of public and private funders, including Lehman College. The key to this model is the on-site teacher-consultant, who is typically a New York City school teacher released to the program by arrangement with the New York City Board of Education. In this position, the consultant co-leads the after-school seminar, provides assistance to teachers, and meets regularly with administrators. Currently, NYCWP has fourteen such consultants working in schools in all five boroughs of the city.

In 1998, NYCWP asked Nancy Wilson, a writer, researcher, and NYCWP teacher-consultant, to document the collaboration between the writing project and Theodore Roosevelt High School. The result of her work is this monograph. While the heart of this piece chronicles the work of on-site teacher-consultant Ronni Tobman-Michelen, Wilson's words also honor the teachers and administrators of Roosevelt High as well as the writing project's approach to professional development.

—The Editors

As time passed, the success of specific NYCWP approaches, coupled with frequent opportunities for discussions of practice, encouraged many teachers at Roosevelt to experiment. Several began with theme-based classroom projects that integrated reading and writing in a number of ways.

Melanie's "Journey"

Melanie Pigeon, for example, created "Journey into the Nature of Solitude," an exploration of solitude that drew on literature and supported the reading and writing of her eleventh grade students. "I chose this theme," she wrote in her report on the project,

because I felt many of my students don't have the quiet time necessary to think about themselves and their place in the world. . . . In school [they] are bombarded with constant noise and stimuli—muffled announcements, bells going off every 42 minutes, bangs on classroom doors . . . and rarely, if ever,
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do [they] experience silence, let alone solitude... I would like to create a quiet atmosphere in my classroom where students have time to sit in silence and reflect on their lives.

In a fast-paced world, Melanie invited students to slow down. When I visited her classroom, students were often reading or writing, sometimes with soft music playing in the background. For the study of solitude, she asked them to respond in writing to poems, stories, and essays; to reflect in their journals on various questions; and to compose their own poetry or fiction. Before one weekend, she asked each student to “go off in solitude to an empty room, a park, or a diner, and open your journal to a clean page...” She, too, completed the assignments. “I have been very impressed,” she reported in the middle of the project, with the level of discussions we have been having in my classroom. “I also noticed that my students have no problem writing silently. In fact, many of them seem to be enjoying the quiet time...”

[They] have really enjoyed the fact that I have joined in with them on all the writing assignments. When we share our writing in the class, we can all discuss the difficulties we have had with an assignment, and they also know that I won’t give them anything to do that I myself wouldn’t do.

In the portfolios they compiled at the end of the study, students reflected on the pieces they had chosen to include and on the process of writing them. The few I was able to read showed the students’ involvement. Katherine, for example, writing about her response to an essay on loneliness, focused on what she had learned in the process:

I chose [this piece] because I realized that there is a change in me that has to do with loneliness. I used to love to be alone but now I do not... I changed for many reasons but if I hadn’t write about it, I wouldn’t realize it. It’s a good piece because [I] analyzed what I think are the reasons for not wanting to be alone.

Faced with her students’ indifference, Gillian drew on her own experience as a writer. To begin her project, she used timelines she had created in a writing project course; to continue it, she consulted Ronni and project colleagues about writing groups, feedback sheets, and publishing students’ work... Jeanne-Marie commented, “It would never have happened if teachers weren’t talking to each other.”

Trung, a student from Vietnam, wrote about composing an essay he had called “My Feelings on a Rain Day,” which he had revised extensively:

I enjoyed comparing the differences between the rain in the USA and the rain in my native country. The rain in the USA was cold and sadness. I also met much challenge to express all my feelings when I was writing this project. I could not rewrite whole event perfectly like I thought... But I paid attention on it many hours.

For the read-around at the end of the inquiry course, Melanie chose to read a piece from her own journal on solitude.

Gillian’s Memoir Project

Gillian Grant also developed an extended project—one that explored an issue that troubled her. Her Spanish-speaking ESL students, she thought, were indifferent to learning English, unwilling to put in the effort to master it. In a piece beginning “Aaaargh!” she wrote of her frustration:

The kids I teach see an America where Spanish rules the day: on the streets, in the businesses, on the radio and TV, at home, with their friends, and even in school where such core classes as math, science, and history are offered in Spanish. (Course anthology, fall 1998.)

Why indeed, she asked, should they struggle over English “when it appears to be irrelevant to their daily life?” Yet without it, she believed, they would never succeed in the United States. “I get so frustrated,” she wrote, “that I am nearly brought to tears.”

Members of her writing group counseled patience. “It takes time,” they said. “Maybe years. Maybe a generation.” Gillian wasn’t willing to wait. “I reached out to my colleagues,” she wrote, “and was graced with some good ideas.”

In a previous project course, Gillian had written a memoir based on a personal timeline; now she decided to try timelines with her students. She showed them hers, in several versions, and invited them to create their own. When the timelines were finished, she displayed them in class. Later, each student, with the help of classmates, chose an incident from his or her timeline to develop into a memoir. “I explained... that we would do subsequent drafts,” Gillian
wrote later, "so they should take care to pick subjects they were willing to spend time investigating." Among the topics students chose: "How I Began To Sing Spanish Reggae," "My Fifteenth Birthday," "Boy Friends," "I Got Robbed," "The Time I Got Left Back," "My First Fight," "When My Grandfather Died," "When I Left My Country," and "Being a Mom."

Gillian found that writing on these topics held her students' interests. Like Ronni [Tobman-Michelen, on-site teacher-consultant for the NYCWJ] herself in her first year in the project, Gillian's students found that they wrote better about things they knew and cared about. They wanted their pieces to ring true. With Ronni's help, Gillian created feedback sheets, so they could help each other as they revised and edited their drafts. Committed to the project, students added material in response to their classmates' questions, asked their parents to help them with details, and sought out the English words they needed. Draft followed draft, each stapled to the one before it. Some students completed four drafts, others as many as five. "Somewhere along the way," wrote Gillian,

I realized my project had turned into a baby and was growing. I felt the desire to do something with these writing samples my kids produced and worked so hard on… I looked to my colleagues for inspiration and got the wonderful idea of collecting the work and making an in-house publication…

Jeanne-Marie, who had done something similar, suggested that Gillian enlist the help of Sonia Mullings, a computer teacher. Sonia invited Gillian to speak with her students, who agreed to type the final drafts. The school's supervisors helped fund photocopying and binding. Gillian herself spent "a ton of my time" assembling an eighty-seven-page anthology, Stories of Our Lives, and felt it was "well-placed effort." She found that students she'd seen as indifferent to English had genuinely labored over their pieces. Because of the publication, they now saw themselves as writers—and writers in English. "I encountered surprisingly little resistance the whole way through," she wrote in her introduction to the anthology. "I do believe that my kids benefited from the opportunity to do their very best."

The experience was illuminating as well as gratifying. Faced with her students' indifference, Gillian drew on her own experience as a writer. To begin her project, she used timelines she had created in a writing project course; to continue it, she consulted Ronni and project colleagues about writing groups, feedback sheets, and publishing students' work. Citing Gillian's project as an example of collaboration, Jeanne-Marie commented, "It would never have happened if teachers weren't talking to each other."

**Approaches to Reading**

At Roosevelt, teachers' teaching of reading, like their teaching of writing, often draws on their experience in project courses. Ronni, in her 1997 "Review of Practice," quoted ESL teacher Marcy Jones:

*Because of my own positive experience in a reading group… I was interested in trying something like it in my classroom. By reading a book together, listening to someone else's interpretation in response to the same event, I became more engaged in the reading… I observed that even the people in the group who didn't like the book interacted.*

Marcy wanted, she told Ronni, "to create this experience for students who felt frustrated with reading." She organized reading groups, stocked the classroom with books, and asked her students to respond to the books in reading logs, dialogues, letters to authors, letters to characters, postcards, and book covers. At the end of the year, she told me, students wrote her letters about their reading; she gave me a copy of the letter she wrote back:

I enjoyed reading your journals… The dialogues brought some of the characters to life. I must admit I've read some of these books dozens of times and the characters weren't flesh and blood until your words brought them off the page…

Many of you loved the group work. Your letters informed me that book groups helped you to understand the plot and make the story more interesting… You could ask each other questions, write to each other, and engage in other activities that make reading more exciting.

Toward the end of the project, Ronni visited Marcy's fifth-period class. Earlier in the year, she reported, it had been a rowdy group. Marcy had spent much of her time quieting [students] down and getting them to stay on task. Reading workshop changed their behavior. Now, they sit reading, engaged in books, talking in small groups, and keeping a folder where they write in response to their reading. (Course anthology, spring 1997.)

Watching her students, Marcy told Ronni, "I have noticed a real change in their attitudes."

Reading the above in a draft of this report, Marcy, Jeanne-Marie, and several other
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teachers cautioned me against presenting an overly rosy view of their classrooms. "You lose some kids," said Marcy. "They put their heads on their desks. They tune out." And Jeanne-Marie noted what was missing in the draft:

It still takes [some students] time to settle down. . . . Where is the kid who looks up at me after ten minutes and says he can't read anymore because his

eyes hurt or because he's tired of reading already? . . . It's not like all kids have miraculously turned into angels who joyously read and write all day.

I knew there were no miracles. I'd seen teachers coax and cajole students to read the texts in front of them, seen them lift students' heads off desks and put pens into their hands. And yet I'd seen classroom after classroom in which students and teachers were reading.

Veronica Blackman moves carefully in her classroom, introducing new strategies a little at a time. "I try things from the writing project class," she told me, "maybe not right away, maybe next term . . . . I have to internalize them myself." She's used reading logs with her special education students and asked them to write reading histories—both activities she herself found useful. She's encouraged them to choose their own reading materials. She is building up to organizing reading groups, she told me; she'll probably try them next year.

Gillian tried a series of "Reading Fridays" in her ESL classes. Students brought books to class, read them in class, and wrote about them. Asked what they thought of this activity, she wrote in a later account, "A surprising number of students said they like it because it helps them with their English." Several were impressed that she set aside class time for reading; they had noted, she wrote, "that I seem to think reading is important."

As Janeth Wynter-Bell told me, "I can say to the students, 'I have read this in my book club.' It translates to the kids: 'It's a book the teacher read—probably in her spare time.' That's important."

Educator Frank Smith, in an essay often read in project courses, writes of "joining the literacy club" (1988). Students, he observes, need to know, first of all, that such a club exists. At Roosevelt, students witness its existence. Their teachers carry books and talk about them; they write in class and read their poems in public. They are visibly engaged with literacy.

"I am familiar with many teachers who care about history, politics, and literature," writes Deborah Meier, "but there's no way their students could know it." Their lives as readers, writers, and thinkers typically take place outside their classrooms. When she and her colleagues designed Central Park East Secondary School, Meier continues, they took care to provide opportunities for students to see and participate in adults' intellectual lives. "We wanted . . . . to create a place that might cause at least some kids to envy us for the life we led, and to want to join our club" (1991, 138).

It does not seem excessively rosy to say that many Roosevelt students became aware that the literacy club was a place to aspire to and enjoy.

References


Nancy Wilson has spent twenty years as a teacher-consultant and researcher for the New York City Writing Project and the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College, The City University of New York. Among her other writing experiences, she and Sondra Perl cowrote Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work (Heinemann, 1986), a book about writing teachers in one Long Island school district.

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