

Writing, in French: A Little Background

ANN DOBIE

The idea for a French writing institute has been around for years. Sometimes referred to as *Ecrire et Enseigner* (“to write and to teach”), such an institute was a natural in French-speaking south Louisiana, but, like many good projects, its realization was delayed while people looked for the funding to put it in place. The money finally came when Nicole Boudreaux and Sandy LaBry, both teacher-consultants with the National Writing Project of Acadiana (AWP), secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Then, all they had to do was find a teacher-consultant who could (and would) serve as the instructor of record at the University of Louisiana, secure cooperation from the English Department, Modern Languages Department, and the College of Education, and get teacher tuition waivers from the State Department of Education to cover registration fees. None of it was easy.

It didn't take long, however, to realize that all of the forms and letters were worth the effort. Twenty teachers, all of them involved in the French immersion and bilingual programs that operate in five Louisiana parishes, were selected to participate in AWP's French writing institute. This institute follows the same model as the summer invitational institute. In fact, the two institutes differ only in that, since most of the fellows involved in the French writing institute are native French speakers from Quebec, New Brunswick, Belgium, Haiti, Niger, and France, the institute is conducted in their primary language. Beyond that, a writing project institute is a writing project institute. With Nicole Boudreaux (an emigré from Grenoble, France) serving as director, the fellows write, give demonstrations, and discuss classroom strategies. They

continued on page 38

Writing, in French

continued from page 34

participate in presentations given by AWP teacher-consultants, and they share their writing in reading and response groups. They are “teachers teaching teachers” . . . in French.

The French writing institute is particularly exciting because of the support it will lend to the participating teachers and, by extension, to the French immersion program. Because parents in this region are eager for their children to value their cultural heritage, the French immersion program has become a popular alternative to customary schooling. As Charles Larroque points out in “Telling the Louisiana Story,” (see article, page 34), language is a fundamental part of any culture, and when the traditional one disappears, as French so nearly did among the Acadian and Creole peoples, memories and traditions fade with it. A critical part of family and personal identity is lost. Going to school in French is one way to keep that history alive and that culture ongoing.

Although the purpose of the French immersion program—to transmit a cultural heritage—may be fairly abstract and general, the means used to achieve it are quite specific. To produce bilingual students who are as proficient in French as they are in English, teachers present subject matter en français. And since writing is fundamental to all learning, attention to writing in French is a major part of the curriculum.

How the writing project—and specifically the French writing institute—fits into this scheme, then, is readily apparent. And people most closely associated with the new institute are quite upbeat about that fit. Sandy LaBry, who serves as language arts supervisor for Lafayette Parish, has been struck by the enthusiasm with which the French fellows have welcomed the institute. “The participants are as energized as those in any writing project institute I’ve ever visited,” she noted. “I believe that we will see the fruits of our collaborative labors in even stronger instruction in the classrooms, in satisfied teachers who nurture their own self-expression through writing, and in a broad and varied selection of workshop offerings for audiences who speak French.”

To this Nicole Boudreaux simply adds that she has never worked harder—or had more fun. And that simple statement—whether in English or in French—says a lot.