Keep On Keeping On:
A Look at Three Years of the New Teacher Initiative

Teaching is a juggling act. We juggle what we believe it is important for our students to learn and the tasks they need to master for mandated state exams with the fact that many of our students lack important basic skills. We juggle attendance and transportation cards with mountains of paperwork. We juggle wanting to do a good job with wanting to have a social life. The New Teacher Initiative, made possible by a grant from the National Writing Project, supported new teachers as they moved through their critical first years and learned to juggle the numerous demands of our profession. Here, Joe Bellacero allows us to peer into their learning process as he shares the group’s successes.

Joe Bellacero
Evander Childs HS

As teachers in the NCLB era, where politicians, business persons, lawyers, test-making companies, textbook publishers and, occasionally, parent organizations set the agenda for education, we are well aware of how frustrating it is not to be trusted, not to be consulted, not to be listened to, when it comes to educational issues. Turn on your TV of a Sunday morning and pick a talk show, any talk show from PBS to CBS: you will find people discussing education and not one of them will be a classroom teacher. Oh, there may be a union person if the issue is the contract, and that representative may have spent some time in the classroom for five or so of his/her thirty years in the education business. But, if the subject is curriculum, standards, standardized tests, literacy, resources, school safety or classroom management, not one of the fresh scrubbed, crisps-suited, serious-miend participants in the discussion will be a career teacher. In the public debate about what happens in America’s classrooms, teachers are voiceless.

Recognizing this and understanding how foolish it is, we would seem that the last thing real educators would do, in constructing a mentoring program for new teachers, would be to ignore their voices in setting the agenda for the program. Yet, that is how it is done. After schools of education have finished with telling “soon-to-bes” what they need to know to teach in the “current educational environment,” the graduates go out and begin their careers under department chairpersons, principals, assistant principals, mentors, literacy coaches, and colleague “buddies,” all of whom will tell their charges at great length what they are doing wrong and how to do it right. Finally allowed to share what they know, these experienced educators do plenty of talking. Listening? Not so much!

In creating the NYCWP’s proposal to the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative, we determined that listening would be our first priority. Beginning with one of the fundamental beliefs of the Writing Project, that teachers learn best from other teachers, Debi Freeman, Felicia George, and I discussed ways in which we could help the new teachers in the program learn from each other. This was also a case of making a virtue out of necessity as none of us could claim any special expertise in understanding the needs and problems of new teachers. We decided to base our work on the structures that already existed within the Project. We would invite the participants to join our courses, consult with them one-on-one, and bring them together in reflective meetings. In addition, with the help of Ed Osterman, we created a listserv where the conversation could be free, open, and safe.

By the spring semester of 2003 eleven participants had been recruited from the staffs of Lafayette High School in Brooklyn and Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, two schools where the Project was already working. At the NYCWP’s annual Teacher-to-Teacher conference, the group came together to learn a bit about each other and about the program. On Monday, March 7, the email addresses of the participants were placed in the Listserv and I sent out a little welcome message. Then we sat back and worried, “Will they talk?” We got one response, so, like a comedian dying on the stage, I sent out a second message, the rather desperately titled, “New Teachers, is this thing working?” As we waited, squirming in our seats, for the hoped for flood of chatter, we began to wonder if the reason other new teacher development programs didn’t let participants control the conversation was because these beginners just didn’t know what to say!

We needn’t have worried. By the end of that first term we had 76 pages of talk. The addition of consultants Amanda Gulla, Angie Pruitt and Katherine Schulten, along with the new teachers they brought to the program in 2004, caused an even greater blossoming of discussion. As I write this in March of 2005, there have been over 250 pages of conversations, clear proof that, given the chance, new teachers are more than willing to share what they know, ask about what they don’t know, and talk about their desires, hopes, fears, and needs.

“I wish I knew that having a mentor might not be as great as it sounds!” Abigail broached the subject carefully. “I thought my mentor was supposed to be someone who helps me through this volatile first year of teaching.”

Kate responded, “I think that what makes someone a mentor is that the person believes in you and empathizes with you (or at least they seem to).” For two weeks people thrashed out how to deal with mentors.

“I am in need of some insider information. This is my second year teaching, and my secondary school for many reasons, is not a very nice place to be. I am convinced that in a better environment, and with a couple more years’ experience, I could become an excellent and very happy teacher....Can anyone suggest some schools I should look into? (Into which I should look?!)?” This led to a conversation called “Irritation and Pearls” where participants discussed whether more could be done by moving to a more supportive one. Such a conversation would never have come up in the student teaching course I took.

“My dilemma is how to broach this topic (sex) in a tactful way? I want to be sensitive to those students who are sexually active and have either had an abortion, or are currently pregnant, involved with gang bangs, have been sexually abused in the past or currently, are still naïve about sex, or any other situation that I may not be aware of. Every other time the
topic of sex has been brought up in the past, it usually turns very explicit very fast, and terms about body parts are flying out of mouths that are atrocious enough to make Danielle Steele blush." Karen sent the question out there for us to think about, and unlike a classroom situation where responses are top-of-the-head, we actually could think before responding.

"I guess I would start by telling them my concerns about the issues and the reason for the presentation/lesson. Then I would invite them to write down all of their concerns during the lesson instead of blurting them out. Maybe that will cut down on the amount of spontaneous emissions." Tricia's thoughtful, funny response gave Karen the idea of using writing.

Humor often eased the way in dealing with sensitive issues. When the above conversation turned to students who turn every lesson into sex talk, I made a suggestion on how to deal with it and ended with, "If that doesn't work-toss them out the window!" Lateefah shot back, "I tried the window, but the students landed on a mattress that was waiting to be carted by the Dept. of Sanitation and returned to class before the period was over. (oh, well)." This kind of talk built a sense of trust and of pleasure in each other's company, so that participants could feel free to talk about serious issues, even at length, with confidence that they would be heard and supported.

From the safety of that trust, a wide range of professional topics was discussed, leaving little doubt in our minds that new teachers have plenty to say that is worth hearing. The following posting from Timothy, shows clearly how the participants used the Listserv to vent their feelings, reflect on their practice, ponder their challenges, and explore their thoughts. It also shows how the teachers felt free to let their personal style show through. "timothy's" playful lack of an upper case letter to begin a sentence, was one of his trademarks.

"the tension between test prep material and 'fun' instruction has gotten to me in the last couple of weeks. on this eve of the 7th grade ELA, I feel a sense of release from a lot of it, and eager to get back into teaching.

'of course, test prep, can be teaching, but I find it so unrelated to my students' lives as readers and writers. for the last couple weeks, I've taught:
1. process of elimination 2. eat a healthy breakfast 3. read the directions (twice) 4. if you guess, you have a 1 in 4 chance in getting the right answer (probability) 5. choose the "best" answer (who says, though?)

"i found my students' reaction to the test prep so interesting, though. In years past (to my knowledge) they have been run through workbook after workbook to get ready for this thing, that many of them were nervous I wasn't going to get them ready for the test (even though it was spelled out in the course syllabus that we'd spend two weeks with 4 practice tests). So not to have the traditional workbook, they were thrown off. once we started, my measurements were definitely different than the Princeton interim assessments have suggested. (has any other 7th grade ELA teacher found the interim assessments VERY easy?) after the tests, I feel they are prepared to have their reading skills measured.

"in response to Tricia's situation...I feel on the fence about vocabulary instruction. I was reprimanded last year for including traditional vocabulary (10-words-on-monday-to-look-up-for-friday). though I understand the ol' district's stance on teaching vocabulary in context, I see many high-functioning high schools involved in intensive vocabulary instruction (word origin, prefixes, etc.). do my students miss out from this?

"I feel that many of them are in beginning stages of reading and writing. where vocabulary can aid this, it can also turn many off. where I am seeing a student write his first poem, I have another student in the same class pulling out a photo-copied packet of words to know for the PSAT."

There is a sense that we are following timothy's thought processes, that, in fact, we are invited to think along with him. This immediacy may be the greatest strength of the NTI Listserv.

This year the grant money from NWP runs out. We are looking for ways to integrate our NTI work into the full range of activities teacher/consultants pursue. Felicia and I have begun work on an NTI Blog where we can post stories and links that might be useful for new teachers. Debi has been writing a history of the work we have done. Debi, Felicia, and I have been working on various dissemination projects so that others might learn from and build on this work. And each of the new teacher participants continues to teach, some in other schools, some in other districts and some in other states, but for now at least, they walk into a classroom each school day. At a time when 50% of new teachers leave within the first three years, we have to see the retention rate of our NTI teachers as an indication that there are real benefits to be found in a technology such as the Listserv. We also believe that giving new teachers the opportunity to control their learning process has immediate benefits to them and may well carry over to the approach they take with their students."

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