WHAT DO WE TEACH WHEN WE TEACH WRITING?

"What do we teach when we teach writing?" It was Sondra Perl's question but Mary K. Healy, Bill Strong, and Marian Mohr all looked at the same issue from different perspectives. The occasion was a University of California, Irvine/San Diego Area Writing Project co-sponsored conference on Exemplary Practices of the National Writing Project held on December 4th and 5th, 1985. Designed to celebrate the National Writing Project and highlight the contributions of key individuals affiliated with the NWP, the conference drew an audience of over 700 K-University teachers between the UCI and San Diego sites.

As an opening speaker, Mary K. Healy set the tone for the conference by discussing the spirit of community inherent in the National Writing Project model and considering how this spirit has not only affected the way teachers interact with each other but the way teachers teach writing. As a result of participating in National Writing Project Summer Institutes, many teachers have discovered the importance of writing for self as well as for others, of writing to learn as well as to show what one's learned, of writing from one's own "intentions" instead of for the intentions of another, and of writing as a recursive process where one does not have to "march forward to the finish line." These discoveries have prompted a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered writing curriculum. Students are more engaged as learners in every stage of the writing process—from the generation of ideas for writing to the development of criteria for evaluation. And, rather than simply assigning writing and settling into the "waiting mode" until the final product comes in, the teacher participates as a partner or coach in an ongoing dialogue with the student.

Mary K. also noted a greater openness and flexibility on the part of Writing Project teachers, a willingness to let go of narrowly structured lesson plans and to say, "O.K. we're going to do this now to see what happens, to see what we can discover."

Marian Mohr agreed that teachers must be "willing to abandon" even the best laid plans when a lesson begins to take on a direction all its own in spite of the teacher's carefully orchestrated prewriting activities. She illustrated this point with a wonderfully funny anecdote about being interrupted by a fire drill in the middle of an assignment on penguins designed for display at "Back-to-School" night. In order to recapture the students' interest in penguins when they returned to the classroom, Marian and her team-teacher generated an elaborate cluster on the blackboard about these fine feathered friends. But the minds of half the students were still outside with the sirens blowing while others became side-tracked in an observation by one of the students that the clusters on the board looked very much like spider webs. At that point, Marian and her partner let go of their own agenda and allowed the students to write about whatever they wanted to. So, what went on display for "Back-to-School" night was an eclectic collection of writers' "works in progress" ranging from stories about spiders to fire drills to a tale about a child's father's tuxedo.

All of this is not to say that National Writing Project teachers have embraced a "non-directional" curriculum, to use George Hillock's term. What is needed, according to Mohr, is a delicate balance of "control and risk-taking." Teachers need to have the vision to look ahead and to mentally construct plans of where they and their students are headed. But, throughout the teaching process, they must take stock of where the students actually are and to resee, rethink and reshape instruction based on their students' needs and interests.

Marian Mohr's teaching style exemplifies what Sondra Perl calls "enabling." In an enabling classroom, teachers use their authority to help students recover their own. They offer their students "invitations" to write out of a belief and a conviction in their students' ability to create and to learn. This confidence in the students' own voices creates a "powerful context" for the search for genuine expression. Enabling teachers begin with real writing, often sharing their own; but they are able to relinquish the "center stage" and to let students find their own way while encouraging them to "inquire" about their thinking and writing processes.

What do we teach when we teach writing? The answer is that there is no answer—no magic formula or ultimate ditto. What seems to unite exemplary teachers of the National Writing Project is not so much what they teach as how they teach it. As Bill Strong put it, "Language itself is the real teacher for all of us." What we do is to empower students to tap their own natural resources—not to put language into their heads but to help them express what's already there.

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