WHAT WE DID LAST SUMMER
OR THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATING
ON A PRODUCT

In September, 1981, at our annual meeting of the Directors of the California Writing Project, Louise Jensen of the Northern California Writing Project reported on a two-week follow-up program she had initiated the previous summer entitled "The Second Time Around." The idea of bringing Teacher/Consultants back together to exchange ideas, experience and expertise appealed to me greatly and I immediately began making plans to establish a similar program at UC Irvine.

Carl Hartman, the Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, helped me find a central focus around which to organize "The Second Time Around" when he called me in to discuss ways in which the UCI Writing Project’s efforts might be expanded—particularly in the area of curriculum design. Before our conversation was over, I had enthusiastically volunteered our Teacher/Consultants to produce a K-12 writing continuum with special emphasis on fostering critical thinking skills in just two weeks. The prospect of collaborating on such a document was so exciting that it took quite some time for the reality of what I had promised to catch up with and temper my optimism. Only then did I begin to question seriously what we could deliver under such time constraints.

With funding from Academic Affairs, supplemented by California Writing Project Core Support monies, we were able to offer nineteen Teacher/Consultant stipends of $200 and an optional five units of credit to participate in an intensive fifty-hour workshop from August 16-27, 1982. Earlier that summer, I had ordered all of the Bay Area Writing Project publications and as many texts as we could afford from Sam Watson’s excellent National Writing Project Bibliography. We divided these materials up according to our own individual interests and agreed to write abstracts, due the first day of our project, about what we read.

Two documents were especially significant for us as we set out to establish our objectives. The first was a recent report of a national reading and literature assessment of over 100,000 American school children, Reading, Thinking and Writing, which cites as its "major and overriding finding" that although students at each level had little difficulty making judgments about what they read, most of them lacked the problem solving and critical thinking skills to explain and defend their judgments in writing. According to the authors of this report, the results of this assessment do not point to any cognitive inability on the part of students to respond analytically. Rather, because of the current emphasis in testing and instruction on multiple choice and short answer responses, students are simply unused to undertaking critical thinking tasks.

The second critical document was a draft of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, Statement on Competencies in English and Mathematics Expected of Entering Freshmen. This intersegmental report stresses that before entering college courses it is "crucial" that students develop the ability "to understand, organize, synthesize, and communicate information, ideas and opinions" and be able to demonstrate those thinking skills by "writing compositions, reports, term papers, and essay examinations." When we contrasted the current "teaching to the proficiency test" trend in the public schools with the expectations of California’s college system, we had to ask ourselves this question: "When, where and how will students get the much needed practice in thinking and writing that will enable them to tap the full range of their cognitive potential? It was in asking this question that we decided upon our goal: to assist teachers in activating the thinking and writing skills of their students.

On our first day of "The Second Time Around" Carolyn Lawson, former Reading/Language Arts Coordinator of the Orange County Department of Education, was invaluable in helping us to determine that what we wanted to produce was not a continuum, framework, task analysis, or scope and sequence but a series of practical demonstration lessons. We recognize the importance of thinking about what one writes and writing about what one thinks. Depth and clarity of thinking enhances the quality of writing. At the same time, writing is a learning tool for heightening and refining thinking. As we discussed the interdependence of these processes, we acknowledged that, as writing teachers, we intuitively foster critical thinking skills through our prewriting, writing, and postwriting activities. We were now ready to make our integrated thinking/writing
approach a conscious one. But first we had to learn more about how people think and learn.

Through the learning theorists, we became reacquainted with the following premises:

- There is a developmental sequence in the growth of thought.
- This sequence progresses from the ability to operate at the most concrete to the most abstract levels.
- The mental structures developed at one stage of operation are prerequisite to success in a subsequent thinking level and incorporated into it.
- Thinking cannot be taught like facts from a textbook, but it can be activated and fostered by teachers who create positive learning environments.
- How people think may depend in large part on what Hilda Taba calls "the thinking experiences" they have had.
- The idea is not to reach the top of the critical thinking hierarchy but, as James Moffett puts it in *Active Voice*, to "play the whole range."

Once we had established a theoretical, sequential framework from which to talk about thinking, we turned our attention to writing. As we reviewed the most recent studies of what people do when they compose, we gained a greater appreciation of the complexity of the act of transforming thought to print. As Flower and Hayes point out in their discussion of "Plans that Guide the Composing Process," "Writing is among the most complex of all human mental activities."

At this point, the question before us was a challenging one—how to apply what we had learned about thinking and writing and "practice what we preach" by transforming abstract concepts into concrete demonstration lessons meaningful to the classroom teacher. Since, at first glance, Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives seemed to be the most compatible with the writing process and the most accessible to classroom teachers, we decided to begin with his levels of thinking as a point of departure. On looking closer, we experienced a shock of recognition: all of Bloom's categories in the cognitive domain—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation—are integral to composing. In other words, the thinking process recapitulates the writing process and vice versa. Because thinking and writing are recursive processes, it is difficult to describe the act of composing in a linear fashion. One can argue (and we did!) whether evaluation should precede synthesis and if one has to analyze in order to apply. We also acknowledged that certain stages in the writing process may simultaneously tap two or more of the thinking levels. The important point, we felt, was that composing involves all of the skills in the taxonomy regardless of the thinking level targeted for in the content of the writing task. Given this premise, we concluded that a sequential series of demonstration lessons whose content would gradually increase in complexity and lead students through the levels of thinking would make the "what" in a paper more accessible and allow students to focus more attention on the "how" of composing. In this way, we would be reducing the constraints placed on student writers. By helping students become better thinkers, we would enable them to become better writers.

With a common philosophy about the interdependent nature of thinking and writing behind us and a common goal before us, we launched into the creation of our demonstration lessons and produced a rough draft of a 200 page document entitled *Thinking/ Writing: Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through Writing*. In addition to a rationale, lists of Writing Project tenets, writing and thinking process charts and interviews with UCI faculty, the document consists of twenty-five lessons that offer prewriting, precomposing, writing, sharing, rewriting, editing and evaluation ideas across the curriculum for K-3, 4-6, 7-8, 9-12 and college, arranged according to the levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The process of collaborating on this product was a tremendous learning experience for all of us. The first phase of our endeavor generated what Sheridan Blau, Director of the South Coast Writing Project, would call "creative chaos." Ideas were voiced, pondered, debated, tabled and reintroduced as we all struggled to establish and define what we knew. Early on, we became aware of our differing learning styles. Some people had to hear an idea over and over again in order to grasp it while others had to verbalize their thoughts—using the group as a sounding board. During these lofty and often circular discussions, our more visual learners pleaded with us to translate abstract concepts into diagrams on the board; strips of colored butcher paper with lists, charts, and favorite quotations began to adorn the walls of our room. Meanwhile, those of us who explore what we think by writing it down were furiously scribbling in our notebooks.

Through this process, knowledge gradually became comprehension. But we did not make what we understood our own until we began to apply it to our writing assignments. Since old lessons would now take on a new thinking/writing focus, it was necessary to analyze them carefully. Many of us were surprised to find great gaps in our prompts where students were expected, without direction, to make significant leaps in levels of thinking. No wonder we saw puzzled faces in the classroom when we explained some of these writing tasks. After we broke the lessons down, we reformulated them and in a room filled with captive but more than willing

*(Continued on page 20)*
response partners, put them back together. Writing was our synthesis. In the process of thinking and writing about thinking and writing, we had concretely experienced the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy!

Ultimately, we will leave the final task of evaluating our efforts to the readers of the finished version of *Thinking/Writing*. Our hope is that it will prompt teachers to think critically about critical thinking and to use our lessons as a point of departure for designing their own.

The highlight of "The Second Time Around" was the day before our project ended when Sheridan Blau came down as a guest consultant to react to our work as well as to share some ideas of his own. At that point, we had so little distance that we needed someone outside our circle to review what we had accomplished. Sheridan’s enthusiastic response gave us permission to feel good about ourselves. Suddenly, it was OK to be proud. We made a commitment; we engaged in an intense, meaningful and rewarding educational experience in the process of fulfilling that commitment; and we delivered... in just two weeks.

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