The View from a Rural Site

by

Phyllis J. Owens

Phyllis J. Owens, an English teacher at Mount View High School in Welch, West Virginia, has been involved in the West Virginia Writing Project since 1984 and has been an active teacher consultant since 1985. In recent years, Owens has received accolades for her teaching; most recently, she was a finalist for the state’s Teacher of the Year. She is married to a high school chemistry teacher, and they are the parents of one daughter.

The coal dust that had been so much a part of my life no longer filled the air. In its place a dreary gloom settled over lives that were being changed forever. Once-thriving communities winked out and ghost towns bloomed. The people — proud and sturdy mountaineers — suddenly realized that they were living not in the Nation’s Coal Bin, but in the Nation’s Unemployment Capital, McDowell County, West Virginia, a region burdened with ninety percent unemployment. A mass exodus followed, leaving stumbling blocks behind for everyone in the rural, isolated area.

The stumbling blocks were big ones for me, a teacher at Mount View High School. Although the area, with its mountains and its friendly people, has always possessed a quaint charm, it has never provided a rich climate for education. And with the economic “bust,” I felt hopeless as I watched potholes capture the roads, saw stores close their doors, and witnessed the number of overcrowded classrooms escalate. Then, in 1984, I became involved with the West Virginia Writing Project, and with a burst of enthusiasm, I recalled the words of a wise old man who told me, “The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how we use them.”

One thing was certain: I had a host of stumbling blocks, and I could use them as stepping stones. McDowell County, located miles away from any college, had never provided me with an opportunity for professional development, so when I got involved with the Writing Project, I was hungry for growth. After my summer with the Writing Institute, I applied to go to the University of California at Irvine to be a fellow in a Writing/Thinking Project. The trip was a wonderful experience, and I guess the greatest insight it offered me was the realization that I could make things happen for me and my students, even in my remote and economically deprived area.

Grant money became the obvious answer to many of the projects that I wanted to do. I plunged forward to write a mini-grant for an anthology of student writing that would depict McDowell County and its proud heritage. Out of this endeavor came The View, a bound, a one-hundred page collection of biographies, character sketches, and histories of McDowell County towns. Along with the book came a printer, a binding machine, and the realization that the writing process does work. It works not only to get students to write, but it works to spark teachers’ enthusiasm. Other grants followed, and although I have never felt wealthy, I have always been able to locate money to begin a new project.
I was also fortunate to become a teacher consultant with the West Virginia Writing Project, which provides me with the opportunity to visit cities all over the state sharing my ideas with teachers. I take with me copies of children's storybooks that my students have written for third graders. I take pictures of my students visiting the third graders and serving as guest authors at the local library. I take scribe books to explain how my students record each day's activities. I take copies of Reflections, an annual collection of my students' writing. With teachers across the state, I have shared a host of ideas for motivating their students by showing the samples of my students' writing. Yet the most important thing that I convey to them is the belief that regardless of where they teach, they can help students produce quality writing. They know that I am from McDowell County, a remote and often isolated area. If I can get the results that I do, they figure they can, too.

Although Mount View High School is a relatively new facility, it has never been completed. It is as if the school were a mirror reflecting the sluggish economy, for the proposed auditorium is only a shell of four walls surrounding mounds of dirt. That vacant, hollow structure has acted as a stumbling block for dramatic productions, yet when Dr. Bob Harrison, from the state's Department of Education, developed Shakespeare West Virginia, I wrote a proposal to participate in the statewide event.

My students, using segments from five Shakespearean plays, wrote a script narrating the self-destruction motif found in the bard's works. They wrote, revised, and rehearsed on a portable stage that was set up in the spacious dining hall. Since they knew they could not present their production to the entire student body at one time, they devised a plan to invite English classes to attend during each class period of the day. It was a tiring but exhilarating day as they staged their talents seven times and then returned to school for an evening performance for the public. The following day they traveled to Charleston, the state capital, where they participated with other high school students in a West Virginia Shakespeare Festival. Since the original production, two other classes have also showcased Shakespeare presentations. In an area where most drama comes via HBO and the nearest theater is an hour's drive away, I feel proud to have been able to provide my students with a taste of classic literature.

Meet the Rural Sites Network

The only surprising aspect of the Rural Sites Network is that it didn't spring up earlier. The common ground shared by writing teachers in parts of West Virginia, Wyoming, Alaska, and a host of other states seems so obvious now that one wonders why it took so long for site directors to recognize it. Not until 1992 did those of us outside urban areas begin to realize that some of our NWP colleagues were talking about problems and strengths we thought were ours alone. When someone from North Dakota commented that the principals in her area weren't too sure they wanted teachers from "the outside" to import new ideas into their schools, her counterpart from Pennsylvania found it easy to say, "I know. I know." The Rural Sites Network was inevitable.

Since that time representatives from the network have discussed their mutual problems and some individual solutions through a variety of forums. The latest project for the Rural Sites Network is a regular column for The Quarterly called "The View from a Rural Site," which will offer readers glimpses of writing teachers at work in the small towns and isolated byways in which many NWP sites operate. Inner-city systems and urban institutions may dominate the daily headlines, but small-town schools have stories of their own to tell, and we want to hear them. We want to know what makes the students special, what gives the teachers headaches, what makes living there fun. If you have had memorable experiences working with teachers and students in out-of-the-way places, we invite you to share them with us.

Rural schools may not garner the lion's share of public attention, but they serve a large percentage of our country's children. By adding their tales to those of larger, better-known city systems, we can sharpen our sense of what is going on in America's classrooms. We hope you will join us as a reader, and perhaps as a writer.

--Ann B. Dobie, director, Rural Sites Network

Submissions can be sent to Ann B. Dobie, University of Southwestern Louisiana, P.O. Box 44691, Lafayette, LA 70504-4691.
Not only is the school without an auditorium, it is perched atop a mountain on a reclaimed strip mine with no other facilities nearby. Many would see this arrangement as remote and isolated from resources; however, in this secluded setting my students and I were able to participate in an excursion into nature that evolved into a yearlong adventure with a friend—a rock. One fall afternoon, my students and I went in search of rocks. When we returned to the classroom a short time later, we did a host of writing activities designed to bond the students with their new “buddy.” Near the end of the class, I “rockknapped” the friends and asked the students to write arguments for why they were the best guardian for their rock.

On the following day, a towering judge (another teacher at Mount View) awaited as my students returned to class to present their cases. The judge was not easily swayed, and several students were forced to revise their arguments to include logic, not just emotion, to secure custody of their friend. The activity evolved into a full year of camaraderie between the students and their rocks. They wrote poems; they wrote letters; they wrote and they wrote. In the end, each student took his rock home, and many have written to tell me that their buddy is with them at college. One student even had her “friend” made into a necklace. Yes, students can and do write in rural and poor environments when the stumbling blocks are viewed as stepping stones.

My involvement in the West Virginia Writing Project has provided me with a professional community that has allowed me to help train teachers in West Virginia, to travel to seminars across the state, and to visit other projects in California and Alabama. All of these stepping stones have revitalized me and helped me to motivate my students. Poems, stories, myths, essays, and even letters are all part of the legacy. One former student wrote to me from college: “I’ve had to write papers and essays like crazy this semester, and I’ve had nothing but good returns. Compliments have come from my biology professors, my scholarship supervisor (who has a Ph.D. in creative writing) and most recently, the chair of the Board of Admissions of the West Virginia University Dental School. They can’t believe that I didn’t take composition in college. Thanks, Mrs. Owens, for teaching me about writing and for being a wonderful teacher.” When I get letters like that, I know that I have turned the stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

When I got my schedule for this year, I saw the six classes, the four different preparations, and the 160 students, and knew that I did indeed have some stumbling blocks. The words of Dr. Fran Simone, director of the West Virginia Writing Project, reverberated: “If you can do it in McDowell County, Phyllis, teachers can do it anywhere.”

Somehow I believe that I can do it. Drawing on the distinctive writing opportunities my rural area provides, my students and I find we have special stories to tell. Sometimes we take a mental journey into a secluded wooded area, recreating explorations that are so much a part of my students’ experiences. Because of their close ties with nature, they can easily recreate such an expedition in their minds, then record their trip in their writing. I am glad to have the opportunity to trek with them, for each year I get new images—images that make me glad to live in a community such as McDowell County, West Virginia, an isolated area, but one where I, with the help of so many students, parents, and colleagues, have been able to turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

Call for Nominations: 1995 Britton Award for Teacher Research

The Conference on English Education is now accepting nominations for the James N. Britton Award for Inquiry within the English Language Arts. Exemplary studies published in any format, including distributed final research reports, are eligible. The studies must be conducted by an English/language arts educator at any level—preschool through university—and may reflect on any aspect of the inquirer’s own teaching. Collaborative research conducted with other practitioners will also be considered. All modes of inquiry are equally valued.

Nominations, accompanied by three copies of the published material, may be made by any language arts educator or by self-nomination not later than July 1, 1994, for studies published between January 1, 1992, and December 31, 1993. Send nominations and materials to Sheridan Blau, 5859 Azalea Way, Goleta, CA 93117. Winners will be notified in December, 1994 and announced at the 1995 Spring Conference in Minneapolis.