

Curriculum Change Through Staff Development

Unlike PSSC Physics, the National Writing Project gets teachers involved in the development process.

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Credit: Michele Bowman

The National Writing Project may be the most successful large-scale plan for curriculum change in recent years. The movement started in 1974 with the Bay Area Writing Project at Berkeley. Today the NWP includes more than 90 sites funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, by ESEA Title IV-C, or by a variety of state and local grants (Fleming, 1980). Most sites are affiliated with universities, where elementary and secondary teachers work together in intensive summer institutes designed to transform their approaches to the teaching of writing.

On the surface the National Writing Project resembles the ambitious PSSC Physics Project. Both involve top schol-

ars who base their work on current theory and research. Both stress inquiry—helping students discover for themselves, not merely know the results of someone else's discovering. Both spread through highly acclaimed summer training institutes. In the early 60s, science teachers came to the universities to experiment in the labs, to read up on new discoveries in their fields, to try out the new materials and simulations. They returned to their classrooms with the enthusiasm that motivates change and the know-how that makes it work (Gilchrist, 1963).

Yet something was missing in the nationwide curriculum projects. A decade of reform failed to bring about the progress reformers had expected. Students found that discovery learning often meant more frustration than inspiration, and their teachers, too, became disaffected. Many reasons have been given for the demise of the "disciplines"

movement, but I would like to suggest another: it neglected teachers. While teachers were trained to implement the new materials, the programs themselves were top-heavy, led by scholars who had never taught young clientele. As years went by and the projects spread, still less time and money went to staff development. Curriculum packages—often programmed and teacher-proofed—became the focus of the movement (Goodlad, 1966). Eventually the PSSC package was praised for including

everything necessary to implement the new curriculum: films, tapes, teachers' guides and laboratory guides, textbooks, tests, and specifications for apparatus. Thus, the prospective adopter knew just what to use and how to use it without having to search around for ways to implement the ideas and trying to figure out how to deal with problems (Owens and Steinhoff, 1976, p. 41).

This approach clearly violates the spirit of inquiry and problem solving that had once attracted teachers to the PSSC institutes.

National Writing Project Model

In the National Writing Project the focus is not textbooks, but teachers. The training has three major components: research, writing, and teaching methods—interwoven in the powerful experience of the summer institute.

Teachers immerse themselves in such works as Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968), and in the "structural curriculum" he later outlined (1976, 1981). The reading is challenging, theoretical yet relevant. Unlike the earlier national projects, which had been based on research and evaluation in the university labs, recent work in writing has relied on an explosion of new empirical data from the classroom. Britton (1975), Martin (1976), and Shaughnessy (1977), for example, turn away from textbook assumptions to examine thousands of actual school pa-

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pers. Emig's *Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (1971) is the first of many in-depth case studies of young writers at work. Diederich (1974) and Cooper (1977) report statistically reliable methods of scoring large numbers of papers using specially trained teachers rather than standardized tests.

Most of this information was not previously available to teachers. Even today, most English teachers have never had a course in the teaching of writing. In fact, when the Gateway Writing Project came to St. Louis in 1978, the libraries of our three universities together stocked less than 10 percent of the basic research cited in the Bay Area Writing Project bibliography. The new knowledge they gain in a summer institute gives teachers a great deal of confidence in their training.

The National Writing Project stresses the direct experience of writing. In a summer institute, teachers try such heuristic strategies as brainstorming, clustering, freewriting, and even guided meditation. They write, critique, and revise their drafts in small groups and prepare their best work for in-house publications. Many leave to transform their own classrooms into workshops where students take pride in their writing and publish their own books to share at "young authors' conferences." In short, both teachers and students see themselves as *writers*. The atmosphere calls to mind the ideal of PSSC: "The schoolboy learning physics is a physicist, and it is easier for him to learn physics behaving like a physicist than doing something else" (Bruner, 1960, p. 14).

Credit: Dave Becker



The methods component of the writing projects has been extremely practical. The NWP has not been dominated by scholars far removed from the classroom. Typically a site is led by two co-directors, one from the public schools, the other from the university. In the summer institute, successful teachers of writing are brought together to build on skills they already possess. Each participant gives a major presentation based on his or her own best classroom practice as illuminated by the professional literature. The project staff suggests appropriate reading and demonstrates other approaches. Teachers thus come to a writing project to develop a curriculum, not merely to learn how to implement materials developed by outsiders. Graduates of the summer institute, known as teacher-consultants, go on to plan and lead inservice programs for their colleagues in the schools.

Some observers have misunderstood the NWP stress on teacher training. They ask about "the" writing project "method," when in fact each teacher collects a variety of methods that hang together on a common thread of theory. Such misconceptions arose when an evaluation team visited the Gateway Writing Project in 1981. They were impressed with the report showing—in statistically significant detail—that students of Gateway-trained teachers wrote better and progressed more rapidly than students in comparison groups (Shook, 1981). They liked the booklets of strategies prepared by teachers in each summer's institute (see Flinn, 1980, 1981). And they noted that several of the teachers had been motivated to conduct class-

room-based research and to write for professional publication. But they kept asking about the "product" Gateway planned to disseminate. Was it a textbook? A curriculum package? When they learned that the project wanted to share its success in training excellent teachers, the team pointed out that a training manual might be disseminated!

Clearly, it is unconventional to bring about large-scale curriculum reform through staff development that treats teachers as professionals. The NWP's greatest strength is in its power to help individual teachers change and grow. **EL**

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