

Portrait of James Gray

Early in Jim Gray's education career, he formed a vision of "teachers teaching teachers" writing. Fortunately, he persisted and turned that vision into a reality. Since the National Writing Project began in 1973 (as the Bay Area Writing Project), it has touched the lives of nearly a million teachers—and Jim is still its Director. He is also a Senior Lecturer at the University of California–Berkeley, where he accepted a position in the teacher education program in 1961.

Usually dressed in a sweater and slacks, Jim Gray occupies a small simple office at the University of California–Berkeley, furnished with borrowed Writing Center furniture. The walls are lined with pictures of National Writing Project site directors, certificates of merit, and plaques. Gray has no doctorate, has done no major research, and confesses that he stands somewhat in awe of the enduring teacher-centered local writing project he created 16 years ago, now the National Writing Project. He grants ample credit to dozens of teachers and professors who have worked with him over the years, and particularly to Albert "Cap" Lavin, an inspiring teacher and Gray's partner in the early years of the writing project.

The Dawn of a "Revolution"

In 1973, Gray set out, quite simply, to help solve the local UC–Berkeley problem of "entering freshmen not being able to write at the level that the university required." What he was really after was nothing less than "a revolution in the treatment of teachers." He had long dreamed of a "part-

nership between the universities and the schools, where the universities can recognize the expertise of the best classroom teachers." His vision was to bring together gifted teachers of writing to reflect on what they were doing, read whatever was known about writing, do some writing of their own and share it with each other, and then after careful

training and coaching become "teachers of teachers." His voice and eyes lit up when he told me, "The project is revered by classroom teachers."

But as Gray recalled for me the period during which his vision first crystallized, his enthusiasm and pride shifted to nostalgia, hurt, and finally anger. Almost three-and-a-half decades ago, as a young English teacher in San Leandro, California, he had worked hard—rummaging on Saturdays through used book stores, building a classroom library, constructing bookshelves out of apple crates, getting kids to read and write, and then read some more. After four years, his principal asked him to speak to the faculty about the art of teaching. "It was a shock, this invitation, but it helped me realize that, indeed, I was doing some good things." Soon other teacher groups sought Gray as a speaker.

Against this backdrop, two English professors from UC–Berkeley visited his school, trying to figure out why "Johnny couldn't read," among other deficiencies. The professors, however well intentioned, reeked condescension.

Photograph by Sarah Holtzapple



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They didn't know me from Adam. But I remember their coming to school with their party line about what we should be doing. What they said increasingly rankled because they didn't know me, and they made this automatic condemnation of what we were doing without knowing what we were doing. They never visited my classroom, they didn't see the library I had or my kids. . . . They didn't know the impact I was having. . . . It was an early experience, but it stuck. It was the initial experience that led to this teachers-teaching-teachers project. It wasn't much . . . just an afternoon talk one day in the '50s by a couple of academic professors, a couple of English professors, that stayed with me. It shaped the way, once I had the opportunity, in which I would teach teachers—never that way. I would assume that the best teachers knew a lot.

From Vision to Reality

The years passed, but that experience stayed firmly etched in Gray's mind. His own public school teaching experience began with a near disaster in Wisconsin, where he had difficulty with control and curriculum, but ended with success in California, where both areas improved dramatically—the result of hard, painstaking work. Gray worked briefly in a community college, then in 1961, in his mid-30s, settled at UC-Berkeley's teacher education program.

The time seemed right to begin turning his vision into a reality. Gray had formed some clear ideas about what would work to improve the quality of student writing. Through tedious

observation plus trial and error, he had also learned what worked in professional development. He knew that the top-down model did not work. University professors were too removed from the classroom, particularly the elementary classroom, and they didn't have much practical experience with the writing of schoolchildren. But he did want their research knowledge and their university setting, which provided neutral ground and time, to set up programs.

In developing the Bay Area Writing Project—the precursor to the National Writing Project—Gray recalled three staff development programs in English he had been involved in during the 1960s: a local California program, the National Defense Education Act Project English program, and a state-run English Teacher Specialist program. He reflected on what had, and had not, worked. Gradually, some basic assumptions began to emerge.

For example, the notion that slow, careful—sometimes even glacial—development is lasting is a critical feature in the project's history. This belief, a product of his years of staff development work, is one that is rooted in Gray's boyhood. An only child and an asthmatic, he had spent much time alone, puzzling through books, learning cautiously but accurately how he best did things and what he liked, especially during slow summer days above the ragweed line in Northern Michigan. Gray also recalled his boyhood in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, and the indirect power of Miss Poppam's hand-selected high school literature class. In that uncharacteristic class, in which the students read a different English novel each week, Miss Poppam had strolled around the room, encouraging their reading and writing. On Fridays she had set aside time for her students to discuss their writing with each other.

Gradually, more fundamental beliefs about the project began to form—for example, that writing teachers must write—but never an established curriculum, never a formula for "the one right way of doing things," and never, never, the notion that no further evolution could take place. These

assumptions, stated in the modest NWP brochure, undergird each original and replicated site and remain simple and direct (see "Basic Assumptions").

After the project had been operating for three years, it was clear that Gray was on to something. His commitment to the authority of excellent teachers, the evolution of a successful program, and the continuous, careful development of each replication saved the project from an empty-minded explosion that would have destroyed its spirit. Further, Gray never publicized the project or reached out to the education world in any way other than the word-of-mouth testimony of teachers. Professors and teachers in partnership contacted him, Gray added, by "writing a letter of inquiry, visiting us, placing a phone call. I'm very proud of that. No huckstering—we wait for the phone to ring."

Briefly, here's how the program works. During the school year teachers are selected for a three- to six-week summer training session. The selection committee, made up of teacher consultants and professors, looks for candidates who already know something about writing, are good teachers, and show potential for becoming skilled teacher trainers. During the summer session, the teach-

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ers write, learn about writing from each other and from research, work in writing/editing groups of about five teachers, and begin to practice how to teach other teachers. In the process, teachers often form ideas for their own research and establish subgroups (ESL or mathematics or high school or elementary teachers) that continue beyond the course. However, the real force of the project is in the writing the teachers do. "As good as everything else has been," one teacher said, "I've learned more about teaching writing from *writing* than from anything else." During their own writing, teachers experience what their students go through, what revision means, which assignments work, the joy that can come from writing, and how much more there is to learn about writing, both practice and theory.

More Than a Bare Writing Course

The National Writing Project has always been more than a bare writing course. Its consistent appeal to teachers, and probably a main reason for its extraordinary expansion, according to Gray, is that "we have a great interest, and have from the beginning, in the professionalization of teachers, so we're constantly stretching the opportunities open to teachers...." The

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project, of course, appeals to English teachers and elementary teachers who are interested in writing but also attracts teachers of all disciplines, particularly those who want to grow professionally through writing or to help students learn through writing.

For example, Gray told me about Bob Tierney, a California science teacher and football coach, whose experience with the project led him to

conduct his own research, an effort that has grown so much that it is now large enough to be called the "teacher-researcher movement." Tierney's hypothesis was that if students wrote a great deal in science, they would know and retain more at the end of the year than students who did little writing. So he learned how to set up an experiment, worked with a colleague, and then tested his idea. To his dismay, however, his first test found no significant difference between the achievement levels of the writing and the non-writing classes. However, Tierney felt certain there *had been* a difference. A year later, when he tested the students, his perception proved accurate: "The class that had written had continued to understand and remember what they had learned" (Tierney, n.d.). Later, Tierney reversed roles with his colleague and did the study again—with the same dramatic results.

The professional growth of teachers is a valuable outcome of the project. It is now common in NWP sites to find teachers keeping diaries of classroom observations and getting involved in research questions. For example, Marian Mohr, a Fairfax County, Virginia, high school teacher and co-director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, leads workshops on teacher research. And several New York teachers collaborated with Professors Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson on an ethnographic study of writing, and the upshot was a book titled *Through Teachers' Eyes* (Perl and Wilson 1986, Heinemann Books).

A Model of Simplicity and Strength

Since its inception, nearly a million teachers have been touched in some way by the National Writing Project, which today has 166 sites in 46 states and 7 foreign countries. The project has a director, a co-director, 11 regional directors, an advisory board, a publications list, a fund-raising program, and a series of national and regional meetings throughout the year—not to mention "a realistic goal of establishing 250 sites nationwide." The power, the appeal, and the efficacy of the project are be-

National Writing Project: Basic Assumptions

1. Student writing can be improved by improving the teaching of writing, and the best teacher of teachers is another teacher.
2. Programs designed to improve the teaching of writing must involve teachers at all grade levels from all subject areas.
3. The writing problem can best be solved through cooperatively planned university-school programs.
4. Change can best be accomplished, not by transient consultants or by prepackaged systems, but by those who work in the schools.
5. Meaningful change can occur only over time. Staff development programs must be ongoing and systematic.
6. What is known about the teaching of writing comes not only from research but from the practice of those who teach writing.
7. Teachers of writing must write.

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Of Gray's work with the project, former Secretary of Education William Bennett wrote in a letter,

The model staff development program you have developed, that has universities working together with schools at all levels, merits the support of those who value excellence in education.

John Hall of the National Endowment for the Humanities stated unequivocally in a letter that

the National Writing Project has been by far the most effective and "cost-effective" project in the history of the Endowment's support for elementary and secondary education programs.

The encomiums from education leaders and others go on and on: James Howard of the Council of Basic Education, cur-

riculum expert James Moffett, even Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* magazine have applauded Gray's efforts. But perhaps Paul Diederich of Educational Testing Service, in the concluding section of his evaluation of the Writing Project, said it best and most forcefully:

With all my bias in favor of hard data, I am already pretty sure that this is one of those ideas that will last—like Langdell's invention of the case method of teaching law about 1870.

An Obvious Idea

In recognition of Gray's achievement, in 1980 UC-Berkeley granted him a senior lectureship and permanency of employment. He is the only director the National Writing Project has ever had—its founder, leader, and inspiration. Through perseverance and the steady refinement of his basic ideas, Gray has turned the project into what the American Association for Higher Education called "an outstanding and nationally significant example of how schools and colleges can collaborate to improve American education" and what the National Council of Teachers of English called "an exemplary national resource." He sees the simple, powerful truths that support university-school collaboration with reassuring clarity. He is as respectful of teacher knowledge as any figure in American education.

Yet Jim Gray claims that all he did was follow the obvious: "I just don't see any differences between academics and high school or elementary teachers. We take for granted that, to be effective, a professor will have to be a continuing scholar. I take for granted that continuing education has to happen for the high school and elementary school teacher as well. That's such an obvious idea."¹

Reference

Tierney, R. (n.d.). *Writing in Science*. Bay Area Writing Project Monograph. Berkeley, Calif.: Bay Area Writing Project, University of California—Berkeley.

Mark F. Goldberg is an Administrator in the Shoreham-Wading River Central School District, Route 25A, Shoreham, NY 11786.

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