Slip-sliding from Theory into Practice

Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School and a co-director of WTWP, shares how the writing project model has changed her teaching perspective.

After the 1995-96 school year, I wrote a paper entitled "Slip-sliding From Theory into Practice" to present to colleagues in the West Tennessee Writing Project. In that paper I wrote of the successes and frustrations I encountered while conducting a series of writing camps with students in two classes - one 10th grade and one 11th grade. I chronicled how I tried to implement some of the practices WTWP models and I believed to be effective. I found that students gained confidence and skill. I wrote the article before our TCAP writing assessment scores for 11th grade persuasive writing came back. In 1995 we had only 10 students earning competent scores. In 1996 we had 40. Seventeen of them were from one of the regular writing camp classes of 25 students. Nothing magical happened. These kids were involved all year in process writing activities that gave them practice and confidence. When it came time to practice for the TCAP, they already understood the concepts of content, audience and purpose. When it was time to take the test, they were not intimidated.

Now I'm at the beginning of a new school year, and I'm ready to build on last year's progress. I went back to the 1996 WTWP summer institute anxious to meet a new group of teachers and learn from them their best practices. I found a wealth of ideas and plenty of stimulating discussion. My reading of Lucy Calkins' Lessons From a Child and a visit from poet Hilda Raz led me into an examination of my role as a teacher. Was I making myself too much the center of attention in the classroom? What would happen if I sat down in a student desk rather than stood at the podium when leading the class through a guided imagery exercise? Would it hold their attention? And what about writing with weaker students? It didn't take long to find out. I plunged into a writing camp with a group of students quite different from the ones I worked with last year. In one of those unexplainable scheduling quirks, fully half of this class is taking English III for the second time. Many are taking two English classes so they can graduate with their class. Last year's groups were ultimately motivated by grades. This group has experienced failure in English and needs to be convinced they have something to say.

So we start. Five minutes of free writing in a journal. This I won't read, and I tell them so. I take a seat halfway back in the second row and write when they do. I notice several kids glancing in my direction to see what I'm doing. The five minutes fly by, the only noise the scratching of pens and pencils and the rustle of paper. When their teacher calls time, several of us scramble to finish a thought. Most have written at least a page - more than they thought they would. After a brief introduction I start asking questions about their earliest memories of reading and writing, both at home and at school. I ask each question and allow them time to jot down ideas in their journals. I scribble in mine. This process takes 20 minutes. Most students have two or three more pages of their own material. It's the end of the period. When I come back the next day I give each of them a copy of the list of things I've learned about them - no names, of course. One of them remembers being laughed at for reading poorly in second grade. Another thinks a writer "paints a picture, only using words." As I read the list, students are looking for and acknowledging their contributions. They are in print, and they love it.

So far, so good. Now I ask them to tell one of their stories. I show them two versions of one of my writing memories from the fourth grade. They can tell which one is more interesting - the one with details. Borrowing from WTWP colleague Martha Freeman, I try to make the idea concrete by comparing an outline drawing of an apple to a plastic apple to the real thing. I cut the real apple horizontally to reveal the seed star around the core, and then cut slices off for those who want a taste. I tell them their stories need to be the real apple, not the black and white.
The most heart-rending lesson I've learned during 26 years of teaching is that the greatest gifts I can give many of my students are approval and gentle affection. The conditions some live in are indescribable. Thank goodness for compulsory education laws; otherwise, some would never find the nurturing they need to develop into caring adults.

My first experience with the emotionally undernourished was trying to teach Terry to spell. Terry was in the ninth grade, but he really struggled to read, and writing was beyond him. We worked every day for a week on a list of 10 two-letter words. He could, on Friday, write correctly common words such as do, to, it, so, and be. The following Monday he didn't know any of them. We struggled and struggled, and I don't know that I did any good whatsoever. He could tell stories though, and I listened. Sometimes I thought I had better things to do, but he was so like a little puppy bringing me a bone that I had to put aside whatever I was doing and find out what he had to say. The year passed, and Terry went home for the summer. During an outing at Enid Dam in July, Terry drowned. After the school year started again, his sister brought me a crumpled handful of Terry's English notes. In the margin of the list of two-letter words was Terry's message,

"Mrs. Hopper

nice

hears Terry."

I was 23 when I learned so forcefully to LISTEN. I began my teaching career in Mississippi during the first years of integration. Although most were willing to give the situation a shot, there were students of both races who determined that "I don't have to take nothing off nobody." One day during a class change when there were 700-800 students in the halls, several hotheads met, and a fight broke out. The violence escalated; boys and girls were striking out, frustrated at whomever happened to be standing nearby. We cleared the halls and took students standing as many nearest us into our classrooms. As many as possible of the participants fight were taken to the office for disciplinary action, but tension ran high. Rumors describing the severity of wounds and weapons students thought they had seen were rampant. Every noise in the hallway was enough to instigate new panic in students and teachers alike. Although I felt safe in my classroom, with no movement in the halls, I felt isolated. After a few minutes, I looked up to see a student standing in my doorway. He was a huge African-American boy; he appeared to be good-natured, but no one messed with him. I had seen him around and knew him by reputation, but he was not in my classes. When I asked him what he needed he said, "Nothing. If I'm standing here nobody will bother you."

"Thank you, David, but you can go back to your class; I'll be all right."

"No Ma'm, I'm stayin'. You're Coach Hopper's wife, and he likes me. I can't let anything happen to you."

Maybe the fact that my classroom was being voluntarily guarded by David kept me from having any trouble on a day when feelings and tempers were on edge. I don't know, but I like to think so. Why was David willing to protect a white woman he didn't know? Because a white man he did know modeled an example of caring without setting boundaries. David extended the lesson by stretching his own boundaries.

Today, 20 years later, I've learned some things do not change. I've had one student killed by an abusive parent, one who was stabbed by his mother when they were both at the same juke joint, one who lives in a barn because his family doesn't want him, and several girls who were sexually abused by family members. These children are starved for affection and approval. Giving what we can doesn't take much from us and means the world to them. I have retired from the public school system in that state and work now in an independent school. Most of the pupils at this school are from well-to-do, caring homes. But not all of them. Just this year I taught a young man whose father is alcoholic and whose mother physically abused his brother. He is failing many of his classes, but he drives a new Corvette. When he parks that car at school he is cool, but when he parks it in his own driveway, he wonders if he will take his brother's place at this mother's hands, and if his father will be sober enough to notice. Through journal writing I caught a hint of what was going on, and when I asked him if he wanted to talk, it all poured out.

Teaching a class that encourages reading, responding, and free writing allows us to learn more than we may want to know. Some things are brought to our attention only after tragedy. Sometimes we can't make a difference no matter how hard we try. We must remember: we often have no conception of how students live and they need us for more than just reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. We must listen.
The West Tennessee Writing Project was established March 1993 as an affiliate site of the National Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley. Located in the Department of English at UT Martin, WTWP is supported by grants from NWP with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional funds to support the summer '96 WTWP institute came from Union City Schools and a 1995-96 Title II Eisenhower Professional Development Grant administered by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

The goals of the West Tennessee Writing Project are to improve writing and writing instruction in West Tennessee schools, K-12. WTWP operates on the principles that the best teacher of a teacher is another teacher; teachers who teach writing must be writers themselves; writing improves as writing instruction improves.

1996 Teacher Participants
Adell Dew—Spanish and English, Union City High School
Billy Allison—9-10th grade English, Univ. School of Jackson
Charlotte Zarecor—12th grade English, sociology, Peabody High School, Trenton
Deborah E. Cox—5-6th grade, Margaret Newton Elementary School, Tiptonville
Donna Dabbs—first grade, Halls Elementary School
Elizabeth R. Womack—8th grade English, Jackson Northeast Middle School
Glenda Arant—7th grade math and language arts, Martin Junior High School, WTWP co-director
Judith L. Russell—Franklin Middle School
Katherine Johnson—3rd grade, Shannon Elementary, Memphis City Schools
Laura Yander—3rd grade Title I, Union City Central Elementary School
Laurita Toone—3rd grade Nova Elementary School, Jackson
Lisa Hurd—10-11th grade English, Jackson North Side High
Mack Moore—health, physical education, biology, pre-

The heart of WTWP is the annual intensive summer writing institute for the best of the best west Tennessee teachers, all subject matter areas, K-12, held on the UT Martin campus and offered as English 700-701 for six hours of graduate credit. These six hours may be used for recertification and may count for "30 hours above" the master's. Grants from the National Writing Project and UT Martin help defray cost of tuition and expenses.

If you would like to apply to be part of the 1997 intensive summer writing institute, June 9-July 3, on the UT Martin campus, complete the form below and mail to WTWP.

The Director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, assistant professor of English at UT Martin. Co-directors are Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Glenda Arant, 7th grade math and language arts teacher, Martin Junior High School.

physical therapy, Union City High School
Martha Hopper—6th grade social studies, Martin Junior High School
Mary Ann Baker—3rd grade, Camden Elementary
Mary Lou Marks—librarian, Camden Central High School; WTWP co-director
Melissa Owen—9-12th grade English, journalism and Spanish, Bolton High School, Shelby County Schools
Paula Cox—1-3rd grade, Camden Elementary
Phyllis Climer—kindergarten, Dyer County Central Elementary School
Sandra Scott—9-10th grade life science, physical science, biology, Riverside High School

Guest to the Institute:
Nathaniel Holmes—principal, Martin Junior High School
Consultant to the Institute:
Hilda Raz—poet and editor of the Prairie Schooner, literary magazine of the Department of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

'97 Summer Institute
☐ Please send me an application for the Summer Institute, June 9-July 3, 1997.

Name ___________________________________________ Phone __________________________
Address ___________________________________________ Zip ________________
School System ___________________________________ Phone _______________________
Address ___________________________________________ Zip ________________

Mail to: West Tennessee Writing Project; Department of English; UT Martin; Martin, TN 38238

About WTWP

"The most important thing I have learned is how to respond to student writing without making the paper my own. I have always tried to put positive comments on students' papers, but I also tend to offer specific criticisms that do not allow students freedom to choose their own ways to solve writing difficulties. I will try to comment on writing this year by questioning and not by marking every error or trouble spot. I finally have ideas on how to do this."

Melissa Owen

"As for my own writing, I've learned to revise more, be more specific, and write my ideas the opportunity exists."

Deborah E. Cox

"...I can and like to share my writing with others. This will be my main goal when I return to the classroom. I want to make my students like to write and be proud of what they have written, enough so that they will want to share it with others...I want to make them responsible for the final product being as good as it can be without my censoring their work or intruding my own opinions into it."

Charlotte Zarecor

For more information

Contact: Margrethe Ahlschwede
(mar-GRAY-da ALL-sweede)
Department of English; UT Martin; Martin, TN 38238; Phone (901) 587-7290; (901) 587-7300; FAX (901) 587-776; e-mail: margahls@utm.edu
Visit our World Wide Web site with links to the National Writing Project and The University of Tennessee at Martin: http://wnm.utm.edu/~mahlsw/WTWP0.htm
Mailing: Angela Garner, senior English major, UT Martin
Spring 1997, UT Martin’s English department will offer three evening courses for both undergraduate or graduate credit on the UT Martin campus.

**Advanced Composition English 305/505**, with Margrethe Ahlschwede, meets Monday evenings, 5 p.m., beginning Jan. 6, 1997. Participants will write on topics of their own choosing, discover ways to make writing better, and read books by writers such as Alice Walker, Scott Russel Sanders, Linda Rief, and John Hockenberry.


**Women Writers: Gender, Race and Class, English 350/550** with Lynn Alexander, meets Thursday evenings at 6 p.m. beginning Jan. 9. The class will focus on social issues and include writers such as George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Gloria Naylor.

Each of these English courses at the undergraduate level counts towards re-certification. At the graduate level, the courses may count for re-certification and/or "30 hours above” the master’s.

For further information about registration for any of these courses, watch for the UT Martin Evening School course descriptions in the mail, or call or write Sandy Belote, Department of Continuing Education, (901) 587-7080, 109 B Gooch Hall, UT Martin, 38238. For more information about content of the courses, call either Victor Depta, Margrethe Ahlschwede, or Lynn Alexander, Department of English, UT Martin, (901) 587-7300.

**Seeking Diversity**

Rief, Linda. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1992. *Rief takes theories from various others and adapts these to her own teaching situation (8th grade). She offers practical information as she encourages teachers to take any of her suggestions and make them their own. The concrete examples of her techniques, her organization suggestions, cited teacher/student interactions, her portfolio use, and her appendix filled with wonderful sample handouts make this a "must-have" teacher resource.*

**A Community of Writers**

Zemelman, Steven and Harvey Daniels. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1988. *Recognizing the differences between elementary and secondary writers and writing situations, Z & D offer concrete, specific suggestions from which teachers can draw. Attention is given to each step of the writing process as well as special attention to group structure and maintenance, classroom climate, the obsession of the red pen, evaluation and grading, writing/subject matter integration, and the role of the term paper. A "must" for all secondary English teachers.*

Reviews by Lisa Hurd, 11th grade English, Jackson North Side High School

**English Teacher’s Portfolio of Multicultural Activities**

Cowen, John Edwin. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1996. *A widebound anthology of award-winning multicultural literature, the book is an excellent source for short, riveting pieces of literature from contemporary Native Americans, African-Americans, Latin-Americans, Asian-Americans, and European-Americans. Individual pieces are thematically grouped, but each is perfectly capable of standing alone or being incorporated into a traditional curriculum. Included with each unit is a list of suggested writing and talking to learn activities.*

**Un-Covering the Curriculum: Whole Language in Secondary and Postsecondary Classrooms**

Strickland, Kathleen and James. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/ Cook Publishers, 1993. *Any secondary teacher contemplating a move away from the lecture/drill/test philosophy of teaching needs to read this book for insights on "the way it works." Using reading and writing to learn, as opposed to learning reading and writing, focuses the teacher and the student on thinking and personal evaluation and provides the relevance our students have been calling for. For the teacher bound to a traditional curriculum, many of the ideas presented here are easily adaptable; they call for a change in technique, not an elimination of the readable greats in literature.*

Reviews by Billy Hopper Allison, 9th and 10th grade English, University School of Jackson.
EDUCATION 3001... "One of the things you must be cognizant of and strive to refrain from in your teaching is birdwalking," my professor admonished. "It detracts from your teaching because you lose focus and valuable instruction time. Besides, evaluators will mark you down if it happens."

She knew this, and I knew this, but early in my first year of teaching as we sat around our reading circle, I was asking myself how I was supposed to explain this to Tyrone.*

We had just read a story entitled "Just Like Daddy" as part of our unit on families. We were discussing the things our fathers do that we liked to do also. The conversation was innocent enough until it became Tyrone's turn to share.

"I don't want to be like my daddy," he said. My gut instinct told me I was about to enter dangerous territory, but novice that I was, I forged ahead.

"Why not, Tyrone?" I queried, hoping against hope that he would answer with something mundane about losing privileges or being put in time out.

"Cause," he said, "he's mean to my mama. He hits her, and last night he put a gun to her head."

What was I to say? What was I to do? How could I help this child who was obviously afraid of his father and fearful for his mother? Should I discuss it now and validate his concerns or pursue the topic later? I decided to do a little of both. "Tyrone, I'm certainly glad you realize that it isn't nice to hurt people we love, and I'm also glad you realize how dangerous guns can be." We spent the remainder of reading time talking about being nice to each other and to our family members and about healthy ways to express anger. We discussed the bad things that guns are used for—how they can hurt, even kill people. We talked about the fact that we should never play with any gun we find at home or in any other place.

Later that day, I contacted the school counselor, made her aware of what had transpired and voiced my concerns. Tyrone never mentioned it again.


*Name has been changed.

...from Theory into Practice (cont. from page 1)

... from Theory into Practice...

No one says this doesn't make sense. They get the metaphor. One-hundred-fifty words, I tell them. Tomorrow. Only minimal grumbling. The stories get turned in. Most are close to the length requirement. Many have worked in specific details that lend a sense of place to their anecdote. Some have gone overboard. Okay. The teacher and I have decided not to grade these. She will give credit for each stage of the process if it represents, in her judgment, an honest attempt to do what was asked. I will, with the students' permission, publish these stories on a hall bulletin board. This means I will comment on these first drafts and ask for a second. I have my fingers crossed. They do the second draft. Many spelling errors disappear. Some remain. Endings get reworked to emphasize the point of the story. There is evidence of both proof reading and revision, but the second drafts are not perfect. That's okay; they're better.

Now it's time to get the bulletin board up. All but two students give me permission to use their stories. I type them up on the computer in the library. (Why aren't they doing this? They don't know how, and they don't have computer access. We'll work on that problem next project.) I bring copies to class to have them proofread and sign. Now they read very carefully and find additional errors. The students are amazed that I can make the corrections without typing the whole thing over. They sign the final copies. They have done well. Their stories are moving and funny, worth telling and worth reading. They are proud of what they've done. Not one of these kids asks me about a grade. What they do keep asking is whether I've read their paper yet and whether or not their work will be part of the bulletin board. They are all included. In addition, I ask their permission to use their papers in a presentation on literacy to the Benton County Reading Association. They agree and are rewarded with a thank you note from the president and a round of cold drinks courtesy of the elementary school principal. They have had a real audience.

I start writing camp with another three classes in two weeks. This will give me a total of five classes and that will have to be the limit. I've already found out this year that I can fade into the background, at least part of the time, and be effective. I've seen that students at all levels of ability respond to recognition of their work. While I'm glad that I have the opportunity to work with these classes on a consulting basis, I believe the next, most important, task is to acquaint more teachers with the writing project model so that the practice of writing and writing instruction will grow to meet the needs of students. We Writing Project consultants need to keep spreading the word.
"I hate white people."

As the words catapulted through the air 23 little heads jerked toward the front of the room, eyes wide, mouths open, waiting for my reaction. This statement took me by surprise, and my mind raced for a response. I watched as my students searched each other's faces for a clue as to how to continue. Finally, a little voice from the back of the room broke the silence. "But, Mrs. Johnson is white." I was comfortable with this statement. I wasn't prepared for the next one, a simple, "No, she's not."

I was captivated by the conversation that ensued. The older, wiser members of the class knew without a doubt that I was white and refused to budge on this issue. Two groups talked back and forth in serious tones but could not come to a resolution. Several students remained silent and watched as their classmates debated. Finally, a spokesperson emerged. A very serious young lady rose from her chair, her eyes swept the room and as her chin nodded emphatically, she announced, "Mrs. Johnson is mixed!" Her facial expression and tone of voice signaled everyone that this issue was settled. No one challenged her.

This was a powerful exchange of ideas for third grade students. Evidently, it was also a powerful experience for me. For now, months later, I find myself returning to this episode again and again in an attempt to sort out what really took place that morning. Why was it that some students did not see my color, yet, this child saw it and despised me? Was my color secondary to her feelings toward me or was it the cause for her animosity? Did I treat her in a way that was different from the way I treated the other students? It's obvious that I will never know the meaning behind each child's statement. I do know that the statements themselves provide valuable insight into the power of my relationships with my students and emphasize my responsibility to continuously examine my role as a teacher. I also know that as a white teacher in a school with an all black enrollment, I have to listen to the voices of my students, or I will lose touch with the emotional climate of my classroom.