

INTEGRATING WRITING: EXPANDING THE ILLINOIS STATE WRITING PROJECT

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2006 Symposium on Teaching and Learning, CTLT, 11 January 2006

The National Writing Project was started in 1974 in Berkeley, California. Since 1991 it has been federally funded through the US Department of Education, and today it is the premier effort to improve writing in America. At 189 sites around the USA (including the Illinois State Writing Project based at ISU), teachers participate in summer institutes, in-service workshops, teacher research groups, book studies, and other professional development activities. The most intensive event sponsored by a writing project is its summer institute, described by the NWP in these terms: "These teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves."

- ☉ The teachers are the leaders. Our motto is "teachers teaching teachers"—none of our programs is based on university professors telling teachers what to do. The people who know best how to teach writing in their classrooms are the teachers themselves.
- ☉ The heart of the institute is demonstration lessons. We don't allow talking head presentations or reports on projects; the person assigned to the demo teaches a class, and the rest of us play the role of students. We stress that the purpose of the demo is not to redo a favorite no-fail lesson but to try something new, to create a new lesson that builds on a lesson that works, to try to fine tune a lesson that needs tweaking, or to try something altogether new.
- ☉ Studying research is a significant part of the institute, though we don't require formal papers. We have a "readaround" daily—teachers pick any book or journal from our collection and read it for half an hour, making a journal entry about it and then discussing it in small groups. As it turns out, many demonstrations come from these readings.
- ☉ The teachers must be writers. This is often the breakthrough for teachers: that they can enjoy writing, can experience what really goes into writing, and can try new forms and styles. In addition to the writing done in the demonstration lessons, we go on writing crawls and have sessions where teachers can workshop their writing and get feedback. At the end of the institute we publish an anthology of writing by the teachers and staff, annotated with information on where the ideas came from, what inspired the writing, and what kinds of response from readers was useful.

The Illinois State Writing Project began in 1992. Since then we have offered an annual summer institute and have regularly offered other programs such as a Young Writers' Saturday program and a February day of reunion and renewal for teachers. We have provided high quality professional development institutes and workshops to over 500 teachers and have reached over 4000 teachers through conference presentations. Jan Neuleib is site director: current co-directors are Claire Lamonica and Jim Meyer, ISU, and Jan Wirsing, Trinity Lutheran School.

The first Peoria institute was held in 2005. For about five years we had been strategizing an expansion of our program to reach Peoria. We worked with Dr. Paula Ressler, then Director of English Education, to offer occasional professional development sessions with Peoria high school teachers who accepted our student teachers, and Jim Meyer (who had significant experience teaching in the Boston Public Schools) carried out a research project in one of the middle schools. In 2004 we had two teachers from Peoria in our ISU summer institute, and we contacted a third teacher from Peoria who had taken our institute several years ago. With this nucleus of teacher leaders we offered our first institute last year.

Already we are seeing the Writing Project "magic" at work. Two of our new fellows (teachers who participate in an institute) have already planned and carried out in-service workshops in their elementary schools, and another group of fellows has planned and received grant funding for a series of after-school "writer's club" activities which will send students into the communities around their schools with cameras, to chronicle the life of the neighborhood.