



TEACHERS AT THE CENTER:

THE STORY OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

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James Gray and The National Writing Project

Educator and National Writing Project (NWP) founder James Gray's involvement with the University of California began in 1961, when he was invited to become a teacher-supervisor in the UC Berkeley School of Education's Teacher Education Division. Gray would continue in this role over the next fourteen years, while also expanding his involvement in regional education programs. The decade preceding the creation of the Bay Area Writing Project saw many local and national initiatives aimed at the improvement of the teaching and study of writing. As a participant in many of these programs, Gray was aware of their strengths and shortcomings and would glean from these experiences when he began to develop the foundational elements of the National Writing Project model.

A Period of Education Reform

From 1965 to 1966, Gray was involved with the English institutes created by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The NDEA, a product of the Space Race between the United States and Soviet Union, was signed into law in 1958. It channeled funding primarily into math and science education until it was amended in 1964, at the urging of the National Council of Teachers of English, to include programs for the teaching of English. Gray participated in the resultant NDEA English Institutes, working as a director of the summer institute colloquium at the University of Hawaii NDEA English Institute (1965) and a teacher of the colloquium course at the UC Davis NDEA Institute (1966). These institutes often used curriculum materials developed through Project English, an early curriculum reform effort implemented in the 1960s.

The early seventies witnessed the coordinated and sustained pronouncement of a "crisis of literacy" in higher education. One after another, a series of articles in regional and national publications picked up the rallying cry of "Johnny Can't Write." A particularly damning Newsweek feature in 1975 distributed the blame between television culture, audiovisual learning aids, structural linguistics, and the emerging movement towards the validation of dialects other than standard English in teaching. The article chose to focus on the poor achievements of student writers at the University of California, attaching the name "bonehead English" to its Subject A remedial English program. The name stuck and was perpetuated through the press.

Discussions surrounding Subject A had been fomented well before Gray's time at UC Berkeley. Implemented in 1926 as a remedial program for undergraduate students who had not passed the university's writing test before admission, it had, by the early seventies, been reportedly receiving approximately 40 percent of incoming freshmen. A student who was required to take the course paid a special fee and did not receive university credit. The proposed elimination of the fee in the early 1970s left the administration scrambling to find alternate funding--whether by raising registration fees, absorbing the course into the regular curriculum, or shifting the financial burden onto the school districts that were sending the Subject A students. Given these issues, a project to improve writing in secondary schools, and thereby reduce the number of Subject A students, would find a receptive audience.

The Birth of the Bay Area Writing Project

James Gray addressed the task of improving student writing to be essentially a teaching problem, dependent upon the cooperation of university and classroom teachers. As a former high school teacher, he was able to draw on his experience, as well as the connections developed at the University of California and the various area programs and institutes, to put this plan into motion. In 1972, James Gray convened a meeting of high school teachers from the Central California Council of Teachers of English with UC Berkeley professors from the English, Rhetoric, and Subject A departments. Held at the UC Berkeley Faculty Club, the meeting highlighted the necessity of better communication between school teachers and university professors. It was a tentative first step towards the establishment of the Bay Area Writing Project, with several important players emerging from the meeting, including Albert "Cap" Lavin and UC Berkeley rhetoric professor Bill Brandt.

It was around this time that the staff-development model that would become the Bay Area Writing Project began to emerge. The concept was simple: the creation of a professional development network for teachers of writing. The model would help leverage connections between the university and secondary schools and bring successful teachers together to exchange and learn from each others' techniques. This strategy was meant to dismantle insular teaching environments and to compensate for the lack of writing instruction in the teacher-training programs of the time.

Proposed as a way to address the "Subject A problem," the project enjoyed the early recognition and continued support of the university administration. In 1973, Bill Brandt, who was at that time the assistant dean of the College of Letters and Science, mentioned the project to Roderic Park, then provost and dean of that college. Park was an early supporter of the project and initiated the involvement of George Maslach, provost of professional schools, and Chancellor Albert H. Bowker, whom he persuaded to provide \$13,000 for the project's development.

Bay Area Writing Project Summer Institute

The first invitational institute of the Bay Area Writing Project took place in the summer of 1974. The institute brought together local secondary school teachers and professors from the university, including Bill Brandt and "Cap" Lavin, as well as three other faculty members from the Department of Rhetoric as summer fellows. The guest speakers were all UC Berkeley faculty members, one of whom was Josephine Miles, a distinguished professor and poet. Miles gave a presentation and wrote a position paper, which the Bay Area Writing Project later published together with her other essays on thinking and writing. Teachers heard presentations, wrote, and shared their techniques with one another. By the second institute, elementary school teachers were also included.



The National Endowment for the Humanities Becomes Involved

By 1976, the Bay Area Writing Project was ready to submit new grant proposals. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which had previously declined to grant the fledgling project, had by this time changed its policy to include writing as one of the fundable humanities. As a result, the NEH decided to support the Bay Area Writing Project and, in addition, suggested that it consider expanding its network to reach other universities in California and beyond. This expansion was publicly announced at a press conference at Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek, at which Ronald Berman, chairman of the NEH, and Wilson Riles, superintendent of schools for California and a supporter of the program, spoke to the national press about the nascent national program.



Bill Webster, the California deputy superintendent of instruction, proposed meetings in Los Angeles, San Jose, and Chico, in order to publicize the NEH grant, which would make available \$15,000 matching grants to new sites, to faculty from all of the University of California and California State University campuses. By the end of the process, the Bay Area Writing Project had expanded across California, selecting eight new sites, and thus creating the California Writing Project. Three new national sites also were chosen: at Rutgers, New Jersey; the University of Colorado, Boulder; and Pace College, New York.

Evaluation and California State Funding

Simultaneously, the Carnegie Corporation of New York funded a three-year evaluation of the Bay Area Writing Project, naming Berkeley's Michael Scriven as the evaluator. Throughout the years that followed, the Carnegie Corporation would continue to support and fund the National Writing Project.

Establishing the National Writing Project

In December 1978, the first National Writing Project Network newsletter was issued, with the opening lines: "With this newsletter we become a Network, and NEH's National Writing Project becomes a reality." By this time, the NWP already counted forty-one sites at campuses in twenty-four states. During that same year, the NWP held its first national meeting for local site directors within the larger National Council of Teachers of English convention in Kansas City. This became an annual event.

The Center for the Study of Writing

In 1986, The Center for the Study of Writing (CSW) was established at UC Berkeley with funds from the National Institute of Education. Directed by Sarah Warshauer Freedman and co-directed by James Gray, the objective of the center was to supplement the research component of the teacher-development programs at the National Writing Project and elsewhere, generating a body of theoretical and practical literature about writing through various research projects and studies. During that same year, the NWP's network newsletter transitioned to *The Quarterly*, which was supported by both the NWP and the CSW.

Becoming a Federal Program

By the late 1980s, the National Writing Project had grown large enough to seek funding on a national scale. The NWP's main champions in Congress were Representative George Miller of California and Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi. The Mississippi Writing Project enjoyed close connections to Cochran (teacher Sherry Swain's father had a friend in the Mississippi capitol and one of director Sandra Burkett's students was Cochran's education aide). The road to federal authorization was an arduous one.

The NWP launched a sustained letter-writing campaign from teachers and their supporters, scheduled meetings with representatives, and provided congressional testimony from NWP leaders and teachers. After a false start during the 101st Congress (1990), the NWP finally saw two bills—Senate bill S. 264, sponsored by Senator Cochran, and House bill H.R. 667, sponsored by Representative Miller—pass into law, under the Education Council Act of 1991. The National Writing Project was authorized as a federal education program, earmarked to receive \$10 million annually in funding.

Site Networks in Urban Areas

In addition to its core model, the National Writing Project has developed several national programs and service networks, which are intended to address and support specific areas in the work of its local sites. As the project assumed a fully national scope, the need arose to address shared issues among its constituent sites.

One of the NWP's earliest programs was the Urban Sites Network, established in 1988 in order to connect sites and teachers to improve teaching in urban schools. Through a series of conferences, retreats, forums, and grant programs, teachers were able to share concerns and best practices across sites. A grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund in 1991 created a three-year inquiry program at NWP sites in eleven cities, paying close attention to issues of race, ethnicity, representation, and connections to school reform.



Site Networks in Rural Areas

Formed in 1992, the Rural Sites Network was created as a way to discuss the shared challenges among NWP sites and teachers in rural areas and small towns. In 1996, the Annenberg Rural Challenge funded the Rural Voices, Country Schools project, another inquiry project meant to produce workable strategies for dealing with issues such as declining populations, widespread poverty, and large service areas. This project also resulted in a spoken-word series called Rural Voices Radio, which featured original writings by students and teachers from rural areas.

Project Outreach Network and English Language Learners

Initiated in 1995 through a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, Project Outreach supported a three-year research and program development effort across eighteen writing project sites, meant to identify underserved areas within each site's service region and to address issues of economic and racial disparity in access to writing project services. The participants developed programs and a body of research literature intended to support work with equity issues. This resulted in an expansion of the NWP mission statement and the founding of the English Language Learners Network, the Teacher Inquiry Communities Network, and a professional writing retreat program. A second and third cohort were launched in 2000 and 2006, respectively.

The English Language Learners Network, formed in 2000 as an outgrowth of Project Outreach, was focused on providing professional development for teachers of English-language learners. Its program included conferences, grant projects, writing retreats, and professional exchanges. The network grew out of the first national conference on the teaching of English-language learners, held at UC Berkeley by the Bay Area Writing Project.

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