

Excerpt from South Coast Writing Project 1993-94 Continued Funding Application (UC Santa Barbara)
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The Role of the Project Director. In an apocryphal story meant to dramatize the principle of “bottom up” Jim Gray is reputed to have said that the main role of a writing project director was to make sure that the Xerox machine was running. That is probably a good metonymic description for what I do as director, which is to say, make sure that the machinery of the project—the intellectual, spiritual, financial, and logistical resources—are available and in working order so that the project can most successfully fulfill its mission. Much of my work is therefore conducted behind the scenes, in making sure we conduct a responsible campaign to recruit and select new Fellows, in recruiting and overseeing a staff, in negotiating with school districts for the release of teachers for renewal meetings, in negotiating arrangements for teachers-on –loan, in obtaining support from districts, from county offices, from the University, in writing grants, in maneuvering for campus resources, space, equipment, secretarial support, FTE for our Winter Writing Project and other on-campus programs, and typically, putting together enough pieces of an appointment from various academic units to cobble together, for example, a position for an associate director or inservice coordinator, and so on.

The uncertainty of resources in the current budgetary climate reminds me of how critical my role is in sustaining our project in the style to which we have become accustomed, quite aside from the funds we obtain through our California Writing Project and NWP grants. In the early years of directing our project I used to feel a constant and uncomfortable anxiety about a condition which I have come to accept with more equanimity (though with no less careful attention): that without constant vigilance our project could lose its university support, its sources of income, its influx of new teachers and new ideas—the substantive and intangible resources which sustain it. In other words, without constant attention it could and might dry up and disappear, at least as an institutional presence. (It may be that I have grown calmer about this danger in recent years as I have come increasingly to see and believe in the strength of our collegial community as an invisible and self-sustaining entity, although it is surely the case that our community would be significantly diminished by the loss of institutional support and continuity.)

So I see myself as an enabler—in the good sense, one who makes sure, as I have said, that the project has the resources it needs to most successfully fulfill its mission. What I haven’t yet said and what is much more difficult to say is what I mean by “successfully fulfill its mission” and what I do exactly to obtain for our project whatever I mean by spiritual and intellectual resources. Since these questions address what our project is really about and what I think this part of the application is most importantly about, let me try to say something about my non-administrative leadership role in our project as distinct from the leadership roles assumed by Fellows and what all of this has to do with the mission of our project. Since I don’t have the time to write the essay that I seem to be calling for here, I’ll have to ask that what I now say be regarded as notes toward such a more fully considered essay.

One of the central missions of our project—perhaps the most important one—has to do with the ongoing professional development of the teachers who constitute our community of colleagues. To some degree that includes teachers we work with in school-site inservice programs, but it more directly and centrally applies to those teachers who make a major investment of themselves and their time in the work of our project. If we take this dimension of our mission seriously, it becomes almost redundant to say that we are also a teacher-centered project. Yet the fact that we are asked on this application how we are teacher-centered (one is inclined to answer that we are teacher-centered by virtue of the fact that we are a writing project: by definition a writing project is teacher-centered; if it's not, it's not a writing project) suggests that something needs to be said about the theory of learning (once implicit, given Jim Gray's anti-theoretical bias, but now explicit) that informs the writing project model and the model of teaching and learning that we in our project would insist applies to classrooms as well. That model of learning and of professional development is fundamentally Deweyan and experiential and holds that we learn through what we do, what we construct cognitively (and effectively) for ourselves. Hence the principle that if teachers want to learn about writing, they must write. And if they want to learn about strategies for helping students learn, they must experience those strategies themselves in demonstration lessons.

The writing project, in other words, is built on a constructivist model of learning which demands that teachers who are going to develop professionally take most of the responsibility for constructing their own professional knowledge. It follows too that we will define development for teachers by the degree to which a teacher becomes an active contributor to the construction of knowledge in a professional community. Hence, teachers are encouraged to become teacher-researchers, to serve as teacher consultants, and to conduct themselves in their roles as researchers and consultants (and teachers) in ways that are consistent with their own experience as learners who construct knowledge. To be such a teacher or learner or consultant or director is difficult because it requires one to function in ways that sometimes appear to subvert traditional hierarchies of authority and power. Hence the teacher who enacts a constructivist model in teaching ceases to serve as the conveyer of knowledge and becomes, like a writing project director, a person who helps to set up the conditions which will enable people to construct knowledge for themselves. Sometimes that means becoming highly directive. Eventually in a healthy community of learners where the learners have learned how to create the conditions for their own learning, it may mean stepping back so far as to become almost invisible. Or, more likely, participating fully in the community as another learner.

Having said that helps me to see why I have found it so difficult to define what my role is in my writing project, beyond the man who makes sure that the machines are all running. I have been inclined to say that my role has been that of intellectual leader, the one who encourages Fellows to extend and deepen their presentations and writing, who encourages them to publish, who helps them to revise their work and get the attention of editors, the one who brings new ideas to the project, the one whose currency in research and theory allows him to locate important new articles to read and emerging researchers to invite to our project to expand the horizons of our professional conversation. Even more importantly I have seen my role as that of intellectual contextualizer and have made it my particular responsibility to help writing project teachers in summer institutes and follow-up programs find ways of placing the practices

that they demonstrate in some theoretical framework—to show with reference to theory or the history of their own experience as teachers how their practices are principled and fit into some larger view of instructional goals.

While I continue to see such leadership as defining my role, I have noticed in recent years that many of my functions are becoming less exclusively mine. I share them more and more with those of our teacher-consultants who have become teacher-researchers and are now conversant with theory and research and able to join me in helping less experienced colleagues frame their presentations in theoretical and historical contexts or revise their work for presentations or publication. Moreover, our teacher-researchers often direct me to new theory and current developments in our field and are increasingly becoming themselves the sources of the new ideas or approaches that our community needs to know about.

I was also inclined at one time to say that my distinctive role as director is to serve as the conscience of our project, to be vigilant in demanding that in all our activities we remain faithful to the principles of learning the teaching and collegiality that are implicit or explicit in the writing project model (even if we disagree sometimes about what constitutes a violation of those principles). And that has been my role for many years and continues to be, especially in our summer institutes. But again, as time passes and our project matures it is less distinctively or exclusively mine. In recent years an increasing number of Fellows in leadership roles in our project have called for the reform of practices that I had come to take for granted. And they have called for reform and have instituted innovative practices on the grounds that they found our former practices tainted by a “top down” posture towards teachers or insufficiently consistent with a constructivist model of learning. (Here I feel obliged to note—in my intellectual watchdog role—that even constructivism can be an avenue by which to violate the principles of the writing project, if it becomes an orthodoxy with more authority than the good sense of an exemplary practitioner. Our prior principle must be that we trust the experience of teachers and build our theories on that trust and experience).

So what can I say about my role as director that distinguishes my role from that of the K-12 teachers and other Fellows in our project? Perhaps it is that I make it my particular task to keep all the machinery running and to exemplify in my own relationship to our project what it means to be faithful to the model. That may mean that as director I have a particular responsibility to demand that all our project activities are consistent with the writing project model and its principles; that I bear a particular responsibility to remain current with theory and research, and to be engaged in my own research and writing, not so that I can share what I learn with the teachers who are my colleagues and not even primarily so that I can help our teachers to frame their practices in the context of current theory (as important as that is), but mainly so that I can exemplify in my own professional life what I means to be a learner and contributor to knowledge in a professional community. It may also mean that I have a special responsibility to remain professionally active in order to hope find new opportunities for professional growth for our teacher-consultants. I’d like to think that my work over the past couple of years as senior author on a major series of composition texts for secondary schools helped me to be a more effective writing project director in so far as it allowed me to arrange for a dozen teachers in our project to contribute to various volumes of the text as contributing authors and to find opportunities to serve as consultants to the publisher. Teachers from

our project thereby earned additional income, published their writing, and were able to involve their students in writing model essays which will be published. In addition, several teachers were invited to travel across the country to meetings with such leading composition researchers and practitioners Peter Elbow, Arthur Applebee, Judith Langer, Ben Nelms, Linda Reif, and Robert Gundlach. Similarly, I have felt that I was doing my job as a writing project director well, when I have been invited to present papers at research colloquia and to identify teachers from my project who could be invited to present a companion talk or workshop on classroom practice.

All of this brings me back to my fundamental role as an enabler for my writing project colleagues. I have the opportunity to fulfill that role more completely than most of my writing project colleagues by virtue of my position as university faculty member—one for whom five courses a year (three in Fall and Winter quarters, two in Spring) is a full time teaching load and for whom time spent on research is not time spent outside of what I am being paid to do. On the contrary, when I spend time on research, I am doing precisely what I am paid to do and what is most likely to win me advances in pay. Not surprisingly, however, neither advances in pay nor status in the University, nor even the benefits that might have accrued for my teaching ever seemed to me nearly as compelling reasons to engage in research or remain professionally active in a national arena as has my responsibility to the teachers of our project whose seriousness of purpose, devotion to their calling, and collegial generosity continue to inspire and nourish me.