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Resistance as Inspiration in a Language and Learning Program

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"There's not enough time to read all their writing."

"I can't give time to writing because I have too much material to cover."

"They need to know the material before they can write about it."

"I don't want to take the risk to try something new. It might not work and I might look bad."

"Writing uncovers ambiguity, and the students I teach don't want to hear that questions don't have easy answers. They don't respect me if I tell them that history is all questions and points of view. They think that I'm either holding out on them or that I just don't know the right answer."

"I've never had confidence in my own writing. How can I evaluate someone else's?"

"Many of the students don't like to write. None like admitting that they don't know something. That's a sign of weakness."

"Some of the brightest students see writing as a waste of time. They want me to teach them the facts."

Judy Grumbacher teaches high school physics; Barbara Larson teaches computer science; Rachel Thompson teaches history. All three teach at Thomas Jefferson High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, and all three have come to believe in the power of writing to spark thought and learning in their classes. All three are eloquent speakers about a philosophy and a method that have transformed their teaching; yet

they frequently find themselves lonely voices among colleagues who resist, as the quotes above attest, to putting writing into their teaching. Indeed, they had been there themselves, until inspiring colleagues and participation in the Northern Virginia Writing Project (NVWP) encouraged them to change their understanding. Moreover, they continue to work in school environments economically and theoretically opposed to the dynamic, elusive learning that writing inspires. They have no trouble talking about the resistance of students, nurtured in such school environments, to the writing they assign. Resistances to writing are a fact of life for these teachers, and each day offers challenges to the will and to the imagination.

An In-service Program Inspired by Resistances

These same resistances, we have come to realize, have shaped and continue to shape the Language and Learning Program of the NVWP, which for fourteen years has been trying to cope optimistically and creatively. It would have been temptingly easy to write a chronological "milestones" report on the growth of what we see as a successful effort—to take pride in and some of the credit for the achievements of teachers such as Grumbacher, Larson, and Thompson. To write from the angle of the resistances we face may be to reveal the flaws in the program, undercutting our notions of success by admitting the problems that continue to drag at our momentum. But as we began to look at our NVWP history through the lens of resistance, we came to realize that resistance, rather than dragging down our program, has been our creative force. We also came to see that the resistance has been within us and our colleagues as well as in those circumstances and attitudes that resist our schemes. We began to think of "resistance" in positive terms, akin to the electrical resistance that transforms the smooth flow of electrons into heat, light, and the power to run our minds and machines. It wasn't a stretch to realize that without resistance, nothing happens.

What we'll do in this essay is describe in brief the resistances that led to each phase of our program; then, using interviews with teachers Thompson, Larson, and Grumbacher, identify the resistances that continue to inspire our thinking.

Milestones of the Language and Learning Program

1978—The first Summer Institute of the NVWP is held, inspired in part by teacher resistance to curricula dominated by rote memorization and multiple choice testing. The National Writing Project as a whole receives federal funding in response to media attacks on declining

writing proficiency by students. Twenty-five teachers, K–University, come to George Mason University for five weeks of reading, writing, presentations, and talk about the teaching of writing. Elementary teachers raise the issue of finding the time to include more writing in a curriculum already packed with such varied subjects as math, science, and history. Elementary teachers explore a novel idea for combatting the resistance posed by lack of time: writing about diverse subjects as a way to blend language arts objectives into the rest of the curriculum.

A literacy report later in 1978 from the Faculty Senate at George Mason attacks the English department for having failed to instill good writing skills in students across the majors. Resisting a proposed junior-year writing proficiency test and a structure of remedial courses, English faculty in the NVWP successfully counterpropose a series of workshops for faculty across the disciplines as a way to improve the understanding of and response to student writing. Faculty members from English and eight other departments attend the first series of monthly workshops.

1979—In response to the national "writing crises," the superintendent of Fairfax County (VA) schools requires high school social studies departments to teach students how to write "perfect" (error-free) research papers. The NVWP is hired to teach an in-service course for social studies teachers, and we encounter intense resistance to our "writing as process" philosophy from teachers, under the gun to produce mechanically errorless writing. Resisting the pressure to abandon what they consider to be sound philosophy, the NVWP directors establish goals: to recruit and train as consultants teachers of social studies; and to influence public education policy through information to administrators. Responding to the needs of teachers outside English departments, the NVWP begins to place strong emphasis on writing as a means to help students learn and think about diverse subjects.

1980–83—The NVWP invites high school and middle school teachers of social studies, math, and science to take part in the five-week summer institutes toward becoming teacher-consultants. However, even with active recruitment, we are able to attract fewer than ten teachers in our region who see writing as more than a product to test knowledge of content. Subject-area specialists in local counties still regard writing as the responsibility of the English department. The NVWP receives state funding for writing across the curriculum (WAC) summer institutes for George Mason University faculty, but the program attracts only a small proportion of senior faculty.

1983—Though NVWP philosophy had broadened several years earlier, the project had continued to advertise its basic in-service course as "The Teaching of Writing" until it had credentialed enough teachers from across the curriculum to justify a more cross-curricular name. (A

founding principle of the National Writing Project had been "teachers teaching teachers"—not college faculty teaching K–12 faculty nor English teachers giving courses to history teachers.) Now, the project renames the in-service course "Writing and Learning" and for the first time sets up courses to be taken by teachers from across the departments within single schools.

1987—Whenever possible, the NVWP had also resisted the pressure to give the "quick fix," one-shot workshop. Though employers, whether school principals or business managers, often see the here-and-gone workshop as a cheap substitute (sometimes not so cheap!) for the in-service course, it had been (and continues to be) our policy to emphasize the long-term benefits of continuity and reinforcement over several weeks or months.

But we, of course, had run up against very powerful resistance: teachers' lack of time to take enrichment courses. By 1987 the "Writing and Learning" courses plus other influences had kindled significant interest in WAC in the twelve school districts in northern Virginia—much more interest than could have been handled by our in-service structure. Moreover, through our network of teacher-consultants throughout the region, we knew of many teachers, both within and outside the project, who were doing innovative things with writing in their classes, but who had no forum for demonstrating their techniques for teachers in other schools and school districts. (Hence there was a need for us to overcome the resistance of distance!) In response, we organize for November 1987 what would become the annual Language and Learning Conference, a full Saturday of concurrent presentations given by teachers from across the curriculum, K–12, plus a keynote address by a well-known writer. (As of 1992, our guests have included Bob Tierney, Denny Wolfe, Toby Fulwiler, Nancy Martin, and Miles Myers.) Attendance at the conferences has averaged over 300 (in three years we had to turn away applicants). For many of the people who come to these Saturdays, this is their only contact with the NVWP, but for many others it has become an annual experience.

1993—In the midst of hard times, as layoffs and salary cuts sour morale and send teachers in search of second jobs instead of in-service credit—while panicked pundits, bemoaning lack of U.S. competitiveness, clamor for more subjects and longer school days—the Language and Learning Program is challenged once again to turn resistance into inspiration.

Turning Resistance into Energy

Our in-service experience has taught us that regardless of the strength and variety of efforts to propagate WAC, certain resistances will never go away because of factors endemic to public schools and to the

student population. We feel that we have avoided becoming burned out on WAC by accepting the need to work with these resistances rather than seeing them as problems we have failed to solve.

Some Common Resistances and the Strategies They Inspire

We gave a brief overview of writing to learn at a county social studies in-service recently and were amazed at the number of teachers who had never heard of writing to learn; who didn't know what free writing was; who had never seen a learning log. At a meeting of social studies chairs recently, one announced the beginning of a WAC program at her school. Each month all departments would emphasize a different punctuation, spelling, or grammatical error. Out of either deference or ignorance, no one challenged her definition of WAC. These two brief examples indicate to us resistances to WAC. What were the factors that kept these teachers so distant from what we know about WAC and writing to learn? How can such an experience help us to design appropriate programs?

Presented below are some of the more common causes of the resistance we face and some strategies we have developed for dealing with them in our in-service programs.

Teacher Preparation: Many of the teachers at the county in-service were new to the profession. Teachers teach the way they have been taught, no matter what they might be told in methods classes. One major source of resistance comes from the college and university faculty in whose classes teachers have sat. Even in methods courses, prospective teachers often find that professors lecture about "interactive teaching styles" but don't exemplify them.

Our in-service courses are designed to break this cycle: they reflect key elements of effective teaching—writing to learn, small- and large-group interactions, teachers teaching other teachers, high standards and expectations. Our courses have the reputation of being "tough" and "a lot of work, but worth it." As history teacher Rachel Thompson says, "People are less resistant the more they know, whether from their personal experience or from enriched academic experience."

Class Size and Time: The first question we are asked at presentations is usually about time: time to read and comment on learning logs and time out of the curriculum for students to write. Budget cuts are driving class sizes up. The class size for English is limited to twenty-four in the state of Virginia, because curriculum planners expect English teachers to devote some time to response to student writing. But social studies classes run upwards of thirty to thirty-five. Even the most conscientious of teachers would have a difficult time with the paper load. What does this say about how learning is supposed

to occur in such environments? An Advanced Placement Government teacher told us that he would have to cut back on the amount of writing he currently assigns because of projected class sizes for next year.

There is no easy solution to this dilemma, which is one of the reasons we make sure that all of our in-service efforts are centered in teachers talking with other teachers. Our Language and Learning Conference brings together teachers who deal with this dilemma daily and who eagerly share strategies dealing with time and numbers. For example, at a recent conference, social studies teacher Jan Valone described the weekly letters that students write to her about what they've learned in their government class. To ease the paper load, Valone responds to the letters of only one of her five classes each week.

Learning Theory and Time: Writing to learn changes a classroom. An educational system that values "covering" material and standardized testing imposes a rigid schedule that restricts flexibility and time needed for exploratory thinking and writing. Computer science teacher Barbara Larson put it this way: "Using writing process and other things we've done which have focused on thinking rather than just presenting content . . . takes more time than if you just whipped out an explanation. The students might not know the material, but you can at least be sure you've covered it." Larson relates the story of a team meeting she had with other computer science teachers about the varied writing and learning activities they had recently tried. They all agreed that "what they had done . . . had slowed them down, but they thought they had done a better job of teaching the material." Rachel Thompson agrees: "Structuring learning around writing opportunities is a lot more difficult than saying, 'You've got to know the Stamp Act for the test.' And if you really are going to involve kids in learning, you can't repeat things from year to year—develop this little program which you throw out to them. Some teachers see themselves as technicians who go out and deliver information each day. Writing to learn demands interaction. It changes the teacher as well as the student."

Teachers who use writing to learn with their students understand the crucial role that time for reflection plays in education. The major dilemma is how to make writing to learn fit into a school *system* that equates reflection with idleness, that admires the orderly march through "material," and that doesn't know how to "count" the strange, unpredictable—albeit interesting—turns that genuine thinking and writing require. Writing to learn changes all the rules. Or as physics teacher Judy Grumbacher says, "Students are used to jumping through hoops. With writing, students make and hold their own hoops." Writing blows apart traditional constructs about how we learn and challenges us to

examine what Jane Emig (1983) called the "magical thinking" that influences the decisions and choices we make as teachers:

> Most North American schools are temples to magical thinking, with the focus not only on explicit teaching but on a specific form of explicit teaching—adults performing before large groups of learners. As evidence: I recently heard of a note an evaluating administrator slipped a teacher who was helping small groups of writers actively construct their reality through imaginative sequences of experiences and activities. The note read: "I'll come back when you're teaching." (135)

This conflict continues to be the biggest challenge in our courses. We address it directly; we discuss it in class and we make it the topic of presentations by teacher-consultants and of assigned readings (e.g., Janet Emig's "Non-Magical Thinking" and teacher essays from Toby Fulwiler's 1987 collection, *The Journal Book*). Moreover, in assigning the participants to keep learning logs, we trust that practice of exploratory writing will lead the teachers to appreciate its value for their students' learning. We have seen again and again that teachers' experiencing the freedom to ask questions, go off on tangents, and try out new connections in their "thinkwriting" brings an exhilaration that they want their students to share.

Writing Experience: It's difficult or impossible to teach what we don't know or haven't experienced. As Barbara Larson puts it: "I grew up in an era when there were those who could and those who couldn't write and I was one who couldn't. I felt totally inadequate when I collected writing." This feeling of inadequacy is true for many teachers across the curriculum. Many of us went through elementary and high school when writing instruction was equated with grammar and editing lessons. The leap to understanding both writing process and the role of writing in the learning process is especially enormous for those who experienced writing in school as something to be feared, avoided, or, at best, memorized.

Teachers need ongoing support in making this leap of understanding. The Writing Project offers a strong in-service course that provides teachers with much writing to learn practice, which makes it possible for them to incorporate these strategies into their classrooms. Many of the teachers who take our courses say that for the first time they feel that they are writers. Still, the resistance imposed by demands on teachers' time has limited the numbers who have taken our courses, or other writing courses, and therefore limits the number who can achieve this new understanding.

The Pressure to Evaluate "Everything": What does one do with the writing? How does the writing count in the grade book? How does

one evaluate writing to learn? The idea that the student can learn through the writing itself, without its being evaluated, conflicts head-on with the widespread assumption that the teacher must be responsible for whatever learning occurs. The idea, as expressed by James Britton (1970) in *Language and Learning*, that premature evaluation of writing by a reader can even hinder a student's writing development, occasions even more resistance. Barbara Larson reflected on a writing project her students had just completed in a computer science class:

> [Because the students had used the writing in order to think], the important stuff had already happened. But I still *felt* that I had to do something with it. And there are two sides to the quandary: volume (the amount of writing to read) and my competence to even look at the writing. How do you grade something like this if you want to do something other than the normal grading for mistakes in content or mechanics and usage?

We find that the way the instructor of the in-service course handles response and evaluation of the teachers' many writings can show teachers answers to some of these questions. These methods then become the focus of class discussions. Also, a standard component of all teacher-consultant presentations is evaluation of students' writing. Further, the Language and Learning Conferences always devote time to this concern. Indeed, in 1991 "Evaluation of Student Writing" was the theme of the conference, with Miles Myers, author of *A Procedure for Writing Assessment and Holistic Scoring* (1980), the keynote speaker.

Risk Taking Perceived as Weakness: All through the interviews, the teachers mentioned "risk taking" and "being a learner along with the students." When teachers use writing to learn, "[they] have to be willing to learn from what happens. . . . In this business of writing, you really have to be a learner. I'm always making connections between what my students say and what I've read in books. . . . When teachers use writing to learn, they've got to keep growing right along with their students." How do school systems support or reward risk taking and an openness to learn from what happens? The perception among many teachers is that trying new ideas and being open and flexible to what is happening in the classroom—as opposed to following a set plan—is considered a weakness, a sign that there is no plan. One teacher said that she would be hesitant to try anything too creative during an evaluation year.

We believe that the success of our Language and Learning Conference and other in-service efforts comes from teachers seeking the support they need to "grow right along with their students." It's one thing for an in-service course to preach flexibility and imagination; it's another for teachers to take part in presentations by other teachers

that exemplify how those teachers have grown through taking risks. We have also come to realize over the years that often project activities provide a safe community and validation of imagination for teachers who do not feel these in their schools.

Resistance by Students: There is one more type of resistance to be considered: the attitudes students bring to our classrooms. Writing to learn is hard work for students. It takes time and the willingness to try it and take risks. We have found that all students, no matter what their prior experience in school, are challenged by writing to learn and are often resistant. One student from an "average" class told us "it was hard to respond to a fact." A student from an advanced class said he was worried about how his writing to learn would sound to other students. He was afraid of sounding dumb or of "getting it wrong." High school students know how to play school, and writing to learn hasn't been part of the game so far. Multiple choice tests and quizzes and short answer questions and worksheets are far more comforting than writing what you understand and don't understand about a history chapter, computer program, or physics problem. Many bright students are used to "being right quickly," and writing to learn challenges and stretches them "to think about what it all means" in ways they often resist. Judy Grumbacher cites the student who said, "I don't have time to understand; I just want to get it done."

Moreover, writing to learn exposes the subjective and often ambiguous nature of knowledge, even in a computer science or history or physics class. Students are used to getting definite answers in content-based courses; years of taking multiple choice tests have reinforced this notion that knowledge is definite and not debatable. Writing to learn can lead to more questions than answers—a scary proposition!—and can open up various points of view not only about the causes of the Civil War, but also about something so seemingly obvious as how to write a computer program. Students need to learn that using their own language to figure things out is not just allowed, but is essential for lasting learning. Students need support in shifting their understanding of the teaching-learning model just as teachers do. Because we are requiring a level of thinking that they are not comfortable with, "we have to keep working with them to be more comfortable. . . . It's a real challenge to think about what it all means."

Again, student resistance is a topic we address directly in courses and conferences, and that we encourage teachers to write about in their logs and to bring to discussions. Teacher-consultant presentations always feature large samplings of student work, which demonstrate the range of enthusiasm and success, and presenters invariably are asked to address how they contend with diverse forms of resistance. We assign readings about the learning paradigms that students bring to

classes, such as excerpts from Paolo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in which he explains the "banking" model of education: teachers pouring information into empty heads, with information—knowledge—existing outside the student in either the teacher or the text.

For the past three years, the NVWP has taken an even more direct approach to student resistance: we have held four-week Student Writing Institutes in the summers, to which upwards of one hundred children, from fifth grade through high school, have come each July. These young writers keep logs, write on topics and in forms of their own choosing, share their work in small groups, and hear presentations by guest writers.

Without Resistance, Nothing Happens

With all these resistances, why do committed teachers persist in using writing to learn in history, in computer science, in physics? The following excerpts highlight what these teachers see as the main reasons to work with the resistances:

> The students learn the content better, and they know it in qualitatively different ways than if they didn't write. . . . When teachers emphasize writing, students are willing to take up pen and paper at a moment's notice. They are not afraid of it. They are prepared to write for different audiences and purposes. (Rachel Thompson)

> Learning in the real world is going to have to be independent learning. You won't always have a teacher up there explaining things; you'll have to figure it out on your own. What we had the students do was look in various texts and try to figure out a topic and write on it. Taking books and reading them and trying to learn from them . . . that's how they are going to learn. (Barbara Larson)

> When the students finally buy into writing, it works better than anything I've seen. There is real excitement in the writing itself, in the class discussions based on reading their writing, and in their general approach to physics. They're becoming real scientists—problem solvers. (Judy Grumbacher)

Teachers are willing to work with resistances because writing to learn helps their students become independent thinkers and learners. Students become more self-confident when they realize that writing can help them figure things out, not only in school but in their personal lives. The teachers we interviewed, exemplifying so many of the teachers we work with in the NVWP, continue to engage the resistances because what *they* resist is processing students through the system without enabling them to learn those skills and attitudes that are taught by

writing to learn. We who have been privileged to have had a leading role in the Language and Learning Program will continue to engage the resistances not only because they will persist, but also because the resistances give our program its shape, its variety, and its sense of purpose.

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