

Avoiding the pitfalls:
The North Vancouver Writing Project
Andrea A. Lunsford and R. Howard Cross

It's the same old story, printed and reported with numbing regularity during the last hundred years. A November, 1981, article in *Quest* that examined "Literacy Lapses," reported that fifty percent of the first-year students at the University of Calgary failed an English proficiency exam and that many university personnel "are quick to blame the high schools." A hundred years ago, the same lament was made by Adams Sherman Hill, who bemoaned the fact that Harvard found itself with students "whose manuscripts would disgrace a boy of twelve" and who further reasoned that "the college can hardly be blamed, for she cannot be expected to conduct an infant school for adults."² *The papers Hill* had been reading, of course, were those of the Harvard entrance examination, concern over which eventually led to the deliberations of the famed Committee of Ten. The committee, headed by Harvard's Charles W. Eliot, urged that composition and literature be unified in high school courses and that more writing be done at the high school level. Again, the same old story: the Committee of Ten solved *their* problem with student writing by raising college entrance requirements and by consigning all work in composition to the high schools.'

If high school English instruction has been so spectacularly unsuccessful, have the colleges and universities been markedly more effective? Decreasing numbers of English majors, the increasing disdain with which many other departments and faculties hold English, and, most importantly, the growing number of university graduates arriving in business, industry, and government jobs, and entering graduate schools unable to write cogently and persuasively—these facts suggest that we have met the enemy, and he (or she) is decidedly not a high school teacher.

The moral of this old story, one highlighted by the recent Rockefeller Commission Report, is that university and high school teachers must break out of century-old antagonistic roles. We must begin to see our mutual goals as interlocking and based on identifiable first principles. Literacy and literature are as inextricably related as speaking and vocabulary, or as reading and readers. The bases of literacy and literature—that is, writing and reading—are the strongest strands in the recursive spiral of making meaning of the world. Meaning—as we must surely recognize by now—is not received but is created largely through the mental processes of abstracting, making inferences, synthesizing, testing, and reintegrating patterns. Since language is one of the major tools in this enterprise, English, at all levels of the educational system, must take the lead in reinstating active meaning-making at the heart of our curriculum.

The North Vancouver Writing Project, soon to be joined, we hope, by a Reading Project, is one attempt to begin this task. The project, born two years ago out of a serendipitous coupling of informed concern over writing in the public schools and a meeting with Ross Winterowd's Huntington Beach teachers, has been through a rigorous pilot

year. It is now in the first year of full implementation in grades eight through eleven. Locally designed materials, an experimental programmatic structure, and intensive ongoing research characterize the program. Results are extremely promising, and response from administrators and the approximately 1(X) teachers and 8,000 students involved is so positive that a similar project is now being piloted in grades four through seven.

But this too is an old story. We have all read many accounts of instant educational successes, the educational equivalent of the get-rich-quick scheme. And some of us, driven by the need to resolve a pressing crisis, may be eager to adopt one of the instant successes and superimpose it on our own systems, with little regard for a particular program's appropriateness to local conditions and student body. Rather than describe the North Vancouver Writing Project and detail the many positive results it has been fortunate enough to achieve,⁴ it seems more useful to explain the most significant and potentially dangerous pitfalls this program has faced. We suspect, in fact, that most projects face similar problems, but that recognition of the problems, solved or somehow luckily evaded, tends to fade in the glow of real or imagined success.

The Human Factor

The first problem relates directly to the old antagonism between high school teachers and college teachers. For at least the last hundred years, university and college professors have typically taken the role of accusers. In response to finger-wagging, headshaking, and a generally holier-than-thou attitude, high school teachers have, understandably, defended themselves. They have derided the university's "ivory tower" attitude and some have pointed out that university teachers are out of touch with almost everything except their own narrow research specialties.

How can we avoid the poisoned atmosphere resulting from this particular Hundred Years War? First, university teachers or researchers should never go into a school district as final authorities, ready to dispense wisdom and create a writing project in their own image. The call for a program or project must arise from district teachers and administrators. To that call, the university teacher must respond positively, helpfully, and pragmatically. Ideally, the university teacher should live in the district, be familiar with the students and schools, and be committed to working as an equal partner with district teachers and administrators. A university researcher who takes this approach and earns the trust of local teachers will then be asked to help in program evaluation, materials development, and in-service training.

Certainly a supportive university researcher should be able to make major contributions to each area. In the North Vancouver project, university "partners" have helped design and evaluate tests, write a manual for teachers, and run in-service programs. Last year, for example, Rick Coe, Lynn Troyka, Peter Elbow, and Andrea A. Lunsford provided intensive workshops for district teachers. Despite such ambitious in-service programs, the distrust and ill will generated by so many decades of accusations and counter-accusations cannot be overcome in a week, or a month, or even a year. In our experience, this difficulty is best met by acknowledging its presence and working slowly but steadily to forge a new bond of trust and cooperation between the high schools and the universities.

A second potential danger to any writing project lies with the principals of the schools involved. Under constant pressure from parents and the public, on one hand, and from department or ministry of education superiors, on the other hand, principals

must be convinced from the very beginning of the need for and importance of the writing project. A principal whose only perceptible priority is instituting a twelve-game schedule for his favorite sports team is a principal who must be lobbied persistently and persuasively. At the very beginning, before the planning of a writing project has even begun, school district administrators should contact principals and explain, in detail, the need for emphasis on writing throughout the school. The key to getting and keeping support of principals for such a project is making certain that they understand the goals and assumptions of the project completely, as well as the results such a project can yield.

It follows, then, that principals should always be involved in the planning of a writing project, and especially in training sessions on teaching writing. Once the project is in place, English teachers must continue to keep principals up-to-date on successes, failures, and changes in the project. Recently, for example, a North Vancouver principal's meeting featured a report by each principal on the writing project in his or her school. Once principals are involved in the project, their support and commitment usually grow.

Third, principals are also key figures in dealing with potential problems with parents or other members of the public. Concerned that their children may not receive a proper education, parents are often suspicious of new programs. We have all heard the stories of parents who complain bitterly that teachers who mark *categories* of error rather than single errors and hence bloody their students' papers far less--are "not doing their jobs anymore." Attitudes such as this are worth discussing patiently and sympathetically because parents who are proud of their school system are enormously helpful to their schools and often mean the difference in a school tax referendum's passage or failure. For these, and a multitude of other reasons, writing project planners must make every effort to explain the goals, and the methods used to achieve these goals, to local parents. Close rapport between English teachers and parents is, no doubt, the best way of getting and keeping public support. In addition, a new writing project can make use of school newsletters and special report-card inserts (which go to all parents), community television and radio programs and local newspapers, and special parent and public evenings in the schools. The North Vancouver project has found that video-tape presentations of the local writing project at work can be especially effective as part of a parent-evening program.

Presenting the fourth potential danger to a successful program are impatient textbook publishers. Publishers sometimes seem peripheral, but their influence in the public schools is ubiquitous. Publishers can endanger a writing project by taking tentative, inadequately developed or tested materials, sandwiching these materials between bright, slick covers, and advertising them as the final answer to our writing and reading dreams. These dreams have been known to turn to nightmares, however, and premature publication harms far more than it helps. It is true, of course, that publishers can't misuse our materials unless we let them. We recommend holding off eager publishers until programs and methods have been given at least a full year of thorough testing.

A second disservice publishers can do to a promising writing project is one for which we, too, are partially to blame. For the last decade, in the name of helping students learn, publishers have increasingly worked harder to lower the reading level of texts that are "too difficult" to read. They have done so with our advice and often with our blessing. Examination of many such "revised" texts suggest that we and the publishers have blundered seriously. The texts with lower "reading levels" are often *more* difficult

to read because the effort to reduce sentence and word length frequently results in cryptic, transitionless prose that teeters dangerously on the edge of incoherence. These "revised" texts and the publisher's reading kits that accompany them, with their short, isolated passages and their lists of multiple-choice "comprehension" questions that students often can answer without reading the text in question, have not helped students acquire the abstracting, inferring, and hypothesizing skills that characterize proficient readers. Yet these texts and materials were all produced by well-meaning people professing to help teachers and students. Writing project designers must learn from this hard lesson and eschew the help offered by publishers until they-the professionals-are certain their materials can be mass produced and distributed without suffering from reductionism.

Evaluation

But suppose that the publishing field doesn't pressure your project for materials, that parents, principals, and students are satisfied and supportive, and that high school and university teachers have, like the lion and the lamb, taken up harmonious cohabitation. Is the writing project guaranteed of success? We would hazard a cautious "yes" if the following pitfalls can be avoided.

The first is a failure to measure and identify progress. In our experience, program and student progress can be assessed and measured productively despite the fact that all testing is fraught with enormous difficulties. Any successful writing project designs tests that are valid-that is, that test what they are supposed to test-and that are reliable. The successful project makes sure that all information gleaned from tests is returned to the teachers concerned.

We have found that although programs and students' progress can be tested, teacher's expertise cannot. Trying to do so threatens teachers unnecessarily and causes strong negative reactions. A more positive method of influencing the quality of teachers' work is to use modeling to encourage teachers to refine and revise their teaching practices. Toward this end, North Vancouver has identified three "exemplary sites," classrooms in which teachers who feel completely at ease with the writing project and are pleased with their results invite other teachers to visit at any time and to take with them new ideas for their own classes.

Concern over test results, materials, and pedagogical techniques can sometimes have a fragmenting effect and lead to the final pitfall we would like to comment on. In the midst of displaying "exemplary sites," designing tests, producing video tapes for the public and specific classroom materials for students, overall goals and underlying principles can sometimes be pushed to the side. Controlling test variables can become more important than student learning. Doing many sentence-combining activities can become more important than making sure students are inferring new syntactic options from them. Teachers, administrators, and university partners must guard against this pitfall by returning again and again to the first goal of any writing project: enabling students to make meaning, to create their own logically coherent worlds through writing and reading. If we intend to break the hundred-year run our same old story has had, this last and greatest challenge must also be met.

Notes

¹James Dingwall, "Literacy Lapses," *Quest* (November, 1981) p.62-63.

²Adams Sherman Hill, *Our English* (New York: Chataugua Press, 1890) p.12.

³Albert R. Kitzhaber, "Rhetoric in American Colleges 1850-1900," Dissertation, University of Washington, 1953, p. 73.

⁴Descriptions of the Writing Project's planning, implementation, and evaluation stages are available from R. Howard Cross, Coordinator of Language Arts, North Vancouver School Board, 721 Chesterfield Avenue, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V7M 2M5.

⁵Studies conducted by the Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois, confirm our findings.