

The Power of PAWLP: One Administrator's Story

I worried as a young teacher of English, that I was doing many things wrong. My cooperating teacher, Mrs. Torrence, a woman I liked very much but whom I feared as well, did not approve of much that I did during our 6 months together. In “those days” (1973-4), students sat in alphabetical rows, read literature no more contemporary than Dickens, and practiced grammar skills during time set aside for “writing.” I had Mrs. Torrence’s 7th grade students working in choice novel groups (*The Pigman* and *The Outsiders* are 2 titles I remember of 5 or 6), writing in character’s voices, and keeping close reading annotations in their copy book journals (pre post-it notes!!). There were 3 English student teachers in that district that spring, and I am certain that Mrs. Torrence told the principal, in no uncertain terms, that he had made a huge mistake when he hired me, rather than the other 2 student teachers, to fill the open position beginning the following year. I continued my outlier ways yet was able to develop a collegial relationship with my mentor teacher, making sure to talk about every possible topic in the world except instruction. But I continued to fear that maybe she was right, that I was allowing my students to have too much freedom and thereby losing so much precious time in which I should be “teaching.”

After that year, I moved from that state and began a new job, where I was the youngest member of the English Department and felt quite intimidated. My students were happy and producing what I thought were fabulous, thoughtful pieces of writing, so I forged ahead. It was not until the summer of 1983, when I participated in the Pa Writing Project (Literature was added some time later) that I finally discovered that there was actual research that endorsed my instructional practices. (Forgive me for having to keep reminding you, the reader, of what we did not have back then, but there simply was no internet and no instant means of keeping abreast of current thinking.) That summer I inhaled the work of Donald Graves, James Moffett, and Donald Murray and relished the opportunity to talk about their theories on teaching writing with my fellow Institute participants. I had the amazing opportunity to be led in this work by two professional women who have remained role models for me from that summer on: Martha Menz and Lois Snyder. They were dynamic young women who modeled engaging teaching practices for us and simultaneously exemplified professionalism. They each went on to hold positions that allowed them to have significant impact on public education in Pennsylvania.

That summer, I learned so very much, but the one lesson that has influenced my career and other aspects of my life more than any other is the knowledge that everyone has a story to tell. So simple, but so powerful and so true. We wrote and wrote and wrote some more. We shared, revised, conferred, revised again, and again and again: each time revealing more depth of detail and richness of voice. I left that experience knowing for sure that I needed always to recognize that my students and my colleagues each have stories to tell and that helping them hear

their own voices as writers would empower them to tell those stories in so many meaningful ways.

Fast forward through a career of 38+ years as teacher of English and/or supervisor of humanities teachers in five different school districts and not only do I keep the guiding principles of the National Writing Project in the forefront of all I do, but I also make sure that, to the best of my ability, I pave the way for teachers with whom I work to grow as I did through PAWLP. During my tenure as supervisor in Garnet Valley School District, I supported 69 teachers, from all content areas, to become Fellows and bring their newly acquired knowledge and enthusiasm back to their colleagues. Now that I am at Lower Merion School District, I am doing the same with the goal of having as many teachers as possible become confident teachers of literacy and thereby, developing a shared district philosophy around the teaching of quality writing. I cannot imagine teaching or working with teachers without the wisdom of the National Writing Project guiding me and the support of the PAWLP team right there beside me. I am not quite sure who I would be without that influence in my life.



Summer 2013 PAWLP Writing Institute Lower Merion teachers and me.

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