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a reflective conversation with Richard Sterling



- *What exactly is this National Writing Project?*

The National Writing Project's (NWP) mission is to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools. At 189 local sites in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, our professional development network annually serves 100,000 teachers at all grades levels and in all subject areas. The NWP is supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Every year at local NWP sites, successful teachers attend invitational summer institutes where they examine their classroom practice, conduct research, and develop their own writing skills. During the school year, these teachers provide professional development workshops for other teachers in their schools and communities. Our programs have great credibility among classroom teachers, and one of the reasons is our teachers-teaching-teachers model.

Not only do our sites provide professional development programs, they serve as intellectual communities for teachers. One of the situations many teachers

confront is professional isolation. There are professional organizations out there to help combat this, but they meet infrequently and they often don't address the issues that teachers are facing in their own communities and classrooms. Writing project sites have developed a way to bring teachers together regularly over extended periods of time so that teachers can actually work on the problems as they arise in their own schools. One of the things we know about education today is that it is very dynamic and things change quickly: students are highly mobile, curriculum requirements change, new assessments are mandated. Writing project sites offer teachers a place to discuss these issues on a regular basis.

Writing project sites also provide inservice programs to local schools. These programs are offered on a fee-for-service basis and are usually designed with local school officials so that they directly address writing issues faced by that particular school or district.

Each year, the national office in Berkeley, California reviews the activities of each writing project site. Each site is awarded a new grant based on its previous year's work, and that grant requires at least a one-to-one

match with funding from other sources such as schools. So there is an incentive system here. Local sites need to develop their programs to be useful to local schools. If they cannot do that, they may have trouble raising adequate matching funds. I would say that on average we defund one to three sites per year—and of course we add new sites each year as well.

- *How long have you been involved with the National Writing Project?*

I started with the writing project in 1978 in New York City. I was at the City University of New York at Lehman College, where two colleagues and I started the New York City Writing Project. I was invited to do so by James Gray, the founder and executive director of the National Writing Project housed at the University of California, Berkeley.

Unfortunately, Jim passed away on November 1, 2005, after a long illness. He was immensely proud of the National Writing Project and the fact that a number of writing project sites founded in those early years, including the New York City Writing Project, are still going strong today. His belief in teachers and in their knowledge, commitment, and creativity never wavered. To answer your question, when Jim retired in 1994, I applied for and was offered the executive director position, and I have been here ever since.

- *I understand that there's also a national report that's just been released; what's that all about?*

You're referring to the *College Board's National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges* reports. Well,

there have actually been three reports have now been published. The first one is titled *The Neglected "R."* It looks at why writing, unlike reading and math, has been overlooked so often in the debate on education reform. I served in an advisory capacity to the Commission, along with experts in the field of writing and composition. The Commission took a lot of our advice about how to proceed on this particular issue, and the report includes several recommendations. One is that every school district and literally every school in the country adopt a writing policy. The report notes that writing is everybody's business and that state and local curriculum guidelines should reflect that, and require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels. The Commission has also suggested that the amount of time devoted to student writing be doubled.

- *What would be your writing policy for the United States of America?*

What I would say is this: School districts need to treat writing as seriously as they treat reading and math. Writing is one of the most powerful ways that young people can learn new information and gain a sense of how well they understand what they are learning. It helps them get a much deeper grasp of new material.

I think that writing should be included in the curriculum from the very earliest grades. I think reading and writing should be taught together and not artificially separated. And I think that writing in the subject areas, especially in middle and high schools, should be part of everyday school life. Essentially, I think writing should be much more embedded in the school curriculum than it is currently. And, if you look at some of our best schools—in fact, if you go to some

of the most privileged schools—you will find huge amounts of time spent on writing.

- *The issue is, in an age of increasing inclusion, where you have more teachers faced with more students who are learning-disabled, youngsters with Attention Deficit Disorder, emotional disturbances, health problems ...*

You mean, how do they incorporate writing into the curriculum given how complex the classroom is?

Well, for special-needs children, if the law works correctly, there should be additional adults in the classroom so that teachers do not have to face that kind of issue on their own. We have found that writing actually works very well for special education students. Teachers have reported to us—many in our network—that writing has a calming effect and it allows students to proceed with their learning at their own pace. So it is a way of individualizing instruction. There are many strategies and approaches that you can use that encourage inclusiveness. Writing should not be thought of as an additional task, but rather one that helps teachers and students with all subjects.

- *How about gifted students? Why do you think writing is important for gifted children?*

Writing is a gift, because it enables them to explore worlds beyond the curriculum. It enables them to use the resources of the Internet and to use writing to capture what they are understanding, and learning. I think you'll find that some of the strongest learners are students who already have very strong writing skills. There are a lot of different ways that students can write today. One of the issues that educators continue to grapple with is 'How do we ensure that

students have the full range of writing skills necessary to succeed in a university?' There's been a lot of talk lately about whether forms of communication like instant messaging, text messaging, and email are actually a problem because they can encourage truncated forms of communication. In my opinion, this is merely an audience issue. Young people should be able to learn to identify different audiences and the purposes for which they are writing. And they will adapt their writing styles accordingly.

That doesn't mean that students don't have to be taught how to write. They do. What I mean by teaching is not merely assigning writing but actually teaching the structures and forms of writing so that students can learn to express themselves for different audiences and purposes.

- *In order to do that, do you think we'll have to lengthen the school day or year?*

I don't think learning should stop in the summer or on weekends. But there's a limit to what schools can do and what we as a society can adequately supply. Schools today have an opportunity to help students learn by tapping into things that students do normally and naturally. They should take advantage of that by encouraging students to do things they like to do—such as using the Internet—that allow them to learn at the same time.

One of the things that you are probably aware of is the explosion of writing that's going on across the country through weblogs. I've been in education for forty years and I don't think I have ever seen such an outpouring of writing in every community of every kind. Now, not all the writing is very good; in fact some of it is

abysmal. But, nevertheless, blogs represent an increasing tendency for people to attempt to express themselves in writing. And that is a good thing.

- *In my view, a lot of students nowadays don't write well because they're asked to take multiple-choice, true-false, fill-in-the-blank, matching-column types of tests. How can we get teachers to encourage more essay and short-answer kinds of writing?*

I agree that assessment matters. As I said earlier, students need to write for a variety of audiences and purposes. Improving student writing and setting higher standards for that writing also involves assessment. One of the problems is that there is so much pressure on students to perform well on district and state tests that some teachers have gotten away from teaching children how to write essays or to answer questions in writing. At this point in time, I think it's fair to say that writing assessments also vary tremendously. So we have at least two sets of issues: the fast-paced, multiple-choice-type assessments and the great variation in how writing is assessed across schools, districts, and states.

While I applaud the addition of a writing component to the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, on-demand writing is only one part of the equation. We need to prepare students to write longer pieces, which includes teaching them to construct a convincing and nuanced argument.

- *What is your view on Will Fitzhugh's approach and the Concord Review?*

Well, many years ago I had a long discussion with him about this. My issue with his

approach isn't that the essays in his magazine aren't wonderful. They are. But they're drawn from probably the top five percent of students in the land. I'm interested in having students from all socioeconomic groups and backgrounds develop their writing skills. Many of the gifted students who have been published in that magazine are completely on their way. Their writing is wonderful, it's true, but I would love to see every student be able to write like that. And to achieve that, you've got to have stronger teaching of writing in schools at all levels—not just at the private schools and top public schools, from which most of his essays are drawn.

- *How do we help the top twenty or twenty-five percent?*

First of all, we need strong writing programs in all schools. There are many exemplary writing teachers out there and in the National Writing Project. We've seen fabulous writing instruction happening in classrooms across the country. But we need more and stronger writing programs in schools.

Additionally, I think there should be more avenues for response. Weblogs are providing some of that now. And the great thing about weblogs is how democratic they are. Anybody can post a blog and follow the responses to his or her writing. In this way, writers can be taken to task if the writing isn't clear or if the views expressed don't make sense.

Frankly though, if we placed more emphasis on writing, I think there would be very few students who couldn't be fairly good writers by the time they reach the tenth or eleventh grade. That's really the key to it—writing should become as natural an

activity as surfing the Internet. Students do that. The keyboard is part of what they do. You may have noticed that MIT will come out with a \$100 computer within the next few years. Everybody will have one, even in developing countries. It will have a modem and a connection to the Internet. It is going to transform things. While voice-recognition software may be the norm someday, keyboarding still reigns supreme, and will for some time. That puts an onus on good writing skills.

- *If you were to issue a writing report card, what scores would American schools get on the issues of writing skills in high schools?*

That question is almost impossible to answer. Writing programs are very good in some areas and very poor in others—sometimes within the same district. I visit schools as part of the work that I do and I've seen fabulous writing programs in schools all over the country. I've seen, for example, incredible work being done in some rural schools in West Virginia. And I've seen pretty awful stuff in quite well-off school districts. The truth is, it's all over the place; it's not uniform. One of the things that the authors of *The Neglected "R"* report hoped to accomplish was to encourage school districts to take seriously the idea of implementing a writing program and policy for their schools. That alone could move us toward more effective writing instruction in all schools. Unfortunately though, at the moment, it's a patchwork quilt with a lot of variance.

Many states now have some form of writing assessment, but the type of writing that is assessed, the nature of the prompts used, and the criteria for judging the student work all vary. *The Testing Trap*, written by George Hillocks, really explains these issues

well. We still need to provide teachers with a better understanding of how to teach writing. Not just assign it, but teach it. There's a real difference.

- *What about No Child Left Behind and writing? Has it influenced it—for better or for worse?*

Well, as you know, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a hugely complex bill. The importance of writing was not addressed directly, but the inclusion of high-quality professional development was very important. In my opinion, NCLB has done us all a favor because it has drawn attention to the inequities in achievement in schools, and that's a very good thing. But that is only the starting point for the changes needed to provide a quality education for all students. As you know, NCLB is coming up for reauthorization in 2007 and I think Congress will make a real effort to put in place changes that will make it more effective. Issues such as additional measures to show student growth, appropriate assessment for English language learners and special education students, and the importance of high school reform need to be addressed.

- *In your view, what's the relationship between writing and higher-order and critical-thinking skills?*

I think they're very closely connected. I'm sure you know this, Michael, because you're a writer too. When you sit down to write, you quickly realize how much you know, or don't know, about a particular subject. Also, writing helps you to think logically and to organize your thoughts coherently—both essential skills to learning just about anything. So I would say it's one of the most powerful ways to learn and I think that our

best thinkers tend to be people who know how to write well.

- *What resources does NWP have for teachers?*

In addition to the resources offered by local writing project sites, the national office publishes a newsletter, *The Voice*, and a journal, *The Quarterly*, as well as a number of special publications such as monographs and books. All of these publications are available at the NWP website, www.writingproject.org, many of them at no cost.

The Voice focuses on national programs, initiatives, research, events, and the work of

local sites in the NWP network. Ten years of archives are available on the NWP website.

The Quarterly is the project's professional journal. It focuses on the teaching of writing, with articles written almost exclusively by teachers for their peers. It will evolve into an online journal in 2006, but 28 years of archives are now accessible through the NWP website.

Another resource for teachers is our book *30 Ideas for Teaching Writing*. Winner of the Association of Educational Publishers 2005 Distinguished Achievement Award for Instructional Materials, this publication presents 30 classroom-tested ideas from writing project teachers. It can be downloaded free from the NWP website.