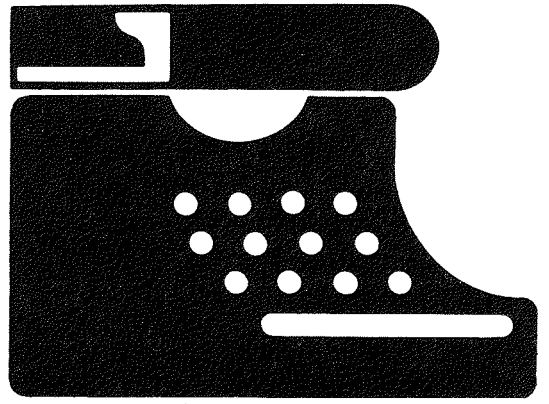


Teachers & Writers



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Special Issue!

WRITERS-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMS

A Note On This Issue

This issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine is devoted to writers-in-residence programs in schools. The first article focuses on the practical side of residency programs. In it, several writers who have taught creative writing in the schools for many years give advice about how to plan a residency and how to cope with the difficulties that arise.

Sheryl Noethe was a writer-in-residence at Intermediate School 391 in New York City last spring. In her article, "My Perfect Residency," she writes about her experiences

in the school. Peter Mason, a teacher at I.S. 391, describes Sheryl's residency from the teachers' point of view.

Over the years poet Harry Greenberg has invented and refined a variety of ways to publish and distribute work written by his students. In "Variations on the Culminating Event" readers will find a list of ideas for everything from poetry video tapes to good old-fashioned anthologies, along with suggestions on how to survive the end of a residency.

—Elizabeth Fox, Guest Editor

Survival Guide to the Schools

by Elizabeth Fox

Introduction

AS PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF TEACHERS & Writers (T&W) I find that writers who want to teach their skills and teachers who want to improve the way they teach writing are often faced with problems similar to those our veteran writers and teachers have solved over the years. Now that T&W writers have been going into the schools for over twenty years, it is no longer necessary for novice writing teachers to reinvent solutions to the same old problems.

To serve those who are new to the field, I've interviewed a few of our most experienced writers and asked them what advice they would give to novice teachers of writing. I asked them how they handle exceptionally difficult situations, and how they avoid the problems less experienced writers I've talked to seem to have.

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I did *not* ask them how they managed residencies in well-organized schools where the administrators and teachers believe the program will benefit their students and the classrooms are filled with highly motivated, well-behaved students. Almost anyone teaching in a situation like this encounters few problems, and other concerns—e.g. developing innovative and inspiring ideas to teach creative writing and establishing an ideal environment for writing in the classroom—are addressed in T&W’s many publications.

While talking to our veteran writers about the practical issues that arise when complete strangers are forced to become colleagues once a week for a few months during a residency, I encouraged them to discuss their most trying experiences and to describe what they do when the collaboration between a classroom teacher and a professional writer doesn’t work out. The advice they’ve given covers a range of topics, from mundane matters of scheduling and organization to exceptionally difficult situations. No matter how brilliant the writer is or how inspiring his or her ideas are, the success of the program depends in part on whether or not the writer can create a receptive context for his or her work. And the context the writer creates often boils down to how scheduling problems and personality conflicts are resolved.

Some of the writers’ comments apply only to writers who visit the schools as guest teachers. Others address problems that all novice teachers face, and some apply specifically to teaching writing in a way that is analogous to the way a writer writes.

Although the advice these writers give is directed primarily to other writers who are just starting to teach, supervisors and teacher trainers may find it useful to pass some of this advice along to their students. Experienced teachers may discover a new approach to try: for example, team up with another teacher in the school and conduct creative writing “residencies” in each other’s classes; or arrange to have older students become “writers-in-residence” in a second or third grade classroom.

Hints on Preparation and Organization

Meredith Sue Willis: The great thing about this kind of work is that you can really come up with things of your own. Because I’m a fiction writer, I got better results when I had the kids actually write prose rather than poetry. When I first started teaching, I always tried to do poetry based on the sort of thing that other writers had done, and that I’d read about. There’s nothing wrong with it. It just didn’t have any connection with what I was writing. The sooner you delve into the kind of writing you really love to do, and make up writing assignments that are connected to the way you work, the better your teaching will be. My teaching improved when I realized that I could use plays. Not that I’m a playwright, but I’ve always loved plays and had done them when I was a kid.

David Unger: When I’m teaching, I’ve found it very useful to watch the same television shows my students watch. It’s a good way to keep in touch with what they are being exposed to. Often TV characters show up in their work. If you don’t watch the programs they watch you won’t know what they are talking about.

Dale Worsley: After each class I make notes in my journal. I include what I did in the class, and what the response was from the students. Then, when I prepare for the next class, I go over my notes and figure out what happened and what I want to do next. I make a note of that in my journal. It ends up being something of a lesson plan. I sketch out how I want to start the class, what assignment I want to present, and about how much time I want to spend on each step. For example, I might decide that I want to start off by reading work from the previous class before moving on to the next assignment.

Unger: After class, I read all the work my students have done, and I log their responses and their progress. I start with concrete assignments and examples and gradually work toward poems that deal with more abstract concepts. When I’m happy with five or six pieces out of twenty, I know they’re ready for more abstract stuff.

The Planning Meeting

Many problems that occur in a residency can be averted during the planning meeting. I asked the writers to talk about what they do during the planning meeting to make sure their programs are as successful as possible.

Worsley: You should remember that when you go into the schools you are bringing with you certain very powerful ideas that these students really need to hear very badly. You should be sure to create a situation that makes the administrators, teachers and students receptive to your ideas.

One thing I like to do when I meet with the principal and teachers before the residency starts is to explain what I’ll be trying to do with the students. This gives the teachers a good chance to express their anxieties and doubts and to ask questions. If everyone knows what you’re doing at the beginning, you can prevent problems further down the line. You might ask the teachers whether or not they foresee any problems with the way you intend to work with their students. If they do, you can try to work something out with them. If you don’t engage the teachers as allies, then you’ll have a very difficult time proving to them that your ideas can work in their classrooms.

Willis: One thing is to look for teachers who really want to work with you. Quite often you don’t have a choice, but the good news is that the principals tend to give these programs as a gift to good teachers.

Larry Fagin: You start off with your dates. At the beginning of a residency you want to be sure that they have the exact schedule with dates and specific times. But remember, there’s no guarantee that your schedule won’t change. You should be prepared to find out that one of your classes is going on a trip somewhere when you’re scheduled to teach. It’s best to make your daily schedule flexible enough so that the classes can be switched with each other.

If you have forty-five minutes or even a whole hour between classes, you want to make arrangements for where you’re going to be and what you’re going to be doing. Ideally, of course, it’s best to have your own little room that’s not being used for anything else. You want to be sure you’re not left to wander the halls.

Before you start the residency, tell the teachers that you’ll need some free space on the blackboard, and that you would like it if the students are ready for your visit. Some

teachers won't be able to do that. You'll be walking in right at the end of the previous lesson, and sometimes they forget that you're even coming.

It's important to visit the classes, and meet the kids and the teachers before you start. It gives the kids a sense of expectation, and lets them know it's going to be a special activity for them.

Willis: If possible you go to the first class about five or ten minutes early. The teacher says, "Oh, I'm not quite ready for you." Then you say, "That's fine. Can I just get my papers in order here at the back?" That's good because then you get to see the teacher in action, and you can see the class in action. I think there's something to be learned from what they have hung up around the walls. If the decorations are a million years old, then it means the teacher is not trying very hard. Even if the stuff offends you, if it's fresh looking, it means at least the teacher is trying, and is more likely to welcome new ideas.

Rapport With Teachers

Ideally, the visiting writer collaborates with the classroom teacher during the writing workshop, but it doesn't always work out that way.

Sometimes the writer's attitude alienates the teacher, and sometimes the teacher simply doesn't want a writing program in his or her classroom.

Occasionally, a writer will work with a teacher whose notion of a well-managed classroom interferes with the activities the writer introduces to the class. In one class I visited, the students became very enthusiastic about the assignment the writer was presenting. During the discussion some of them wiggled around in their chairs as they raised their hands waiting for the writer to call on them. The teacher, apparently fearing that the class was in danger of getting out of hand, started making a list on the blackboard of all the students who would later be punished for being disruptive.

Willis: During my early teaching career, one of the mistakes I made was that I would say to a teacher, "I don't want you to do anything. I'll do it all myself." And the teacher would say, "Oh? Okay," and sit in the back and let me completely lose the class. I remember once going through a whole class and the teacher refused to move. She sat in the back with her newspaper, and let the kids go wild. It was awful.

Now I make a point of saying to the teacher, "I would like to follow your classroom rules as much as possible, and I'd like you to participate." What you're saying when you ask them to get involved is: "I want you here."

Worsley: I've had teachers who were skeptical that my ideas could work, and who undermined me by not providing the support that I needed in their classrooms. Sometimes when those teachers see that your ideas really do work they will turn around and give you the support you need. That's the ideal way to convert antagonistic teachers.

Fagin: Originally I expected the teachers to be enthusiastic and I got upset when they weren't. As time went on I began to see that teachers were an oppressed minority, and I began to be a little more sympathetic. Now I'm delighted when they are enthusiastic.

Willis: Sometimes you'll get a teacher who feels competitive with you about teaching writing. If a classroom teacher

is competitive with you, it's not necessarily a problem. It depends on the kind of competition. If it means they are going to try to have some better writing during the week than the kids did with you, that's not all that bad. It's just going to make them write more with their kids. But sometimes a teacher will bring out all the terrific writing they did over the year and make me spend half the period reading it instead of teaching the class.

Another good thing to do with competitive teachers is to get them involved, especially during the discussion. If you can get their information into the discussion, that helps everybody. But even better is if you can ask the teacher if there's a topic he or she wants you to talk about.

The problem that's more likely is that you'll get a teacher who is so stiff that the kids will hardly move because they are so frightened or worried about being good.

If the strict teacher is in fact a good teacher who is simply "old-fashioned," it's not such a problem. I've had some of my best lessons in classes like that. It's a really tightly-run ship, but by a teacher who cares, a teacher who knows how to channel classroom energy. And the kids actually respect their teacher. If you've got that, then you can really go to town. The kids will discuss in an organized way; they'll do anything you tell them because they assume: A) that they have to do what the teacher says, and B) that what the teacher says is going to be worth doing. So you can really do anything with that kind of class.

But if you have a teacher who is strict and can't stand it if the kids enjoy themselves, it's a problem. I've been in classrooms where within the first couple minutes I've gotten the kids to laugh, and the teacher just swooped off the desk and started patrolling the aisles. When you've got one of those the sooner you get the kids working on their own projects the better.

Classroom Discipline

Almost every teacher has a problem with discipline at some time or another. I asked the writers how they deal with classroom discipline in general and how they cope with exceptionally difficult situations.

Willis: The thing that bothered me a lot when I started teaching falls under the heading of discipline or classroom management. I used to feel I was a failure if I didn't do great at that. But, no matter how terrific the writer is or how brilliant or clever or loving or whatever, he or she really has to deal with the discipline situation the teacher has already created. It was very hard to get that through to myself because I kept thinking that there was something wrong with me because I couldn't just walk in and say, "Here I am with my wonderful things. Listen." Just because the students liked me and I liked them, it didn't mean that they were going to listen to me if the teacher was out of the room.

Fagin: One way around the discipline problem—and this is a good trick—is to have the kids work with partners. That way at least they get to whisper to a neighbor while working on a writing project. It's a very good way to cut through the problem of kids talking and disrupting the class.

If there's a really disruptive kid, I try to iron out the problem by taking my cue from the teacher. I semi-consciously imitate the teacher. I pick up his or her general style, and try to have a relationship with the class similar to

the teacher's. When you have a pull-out class, of course you have a lot more power, and you can just say, "All right, if you don't want to be here, go back to class." Generally it doesn't get that extreme.

Willis: With little kids, particularly in small groups, you can touch them. You can't touch big kids. You have to be very sparing with touches too. But especially if you had a group of little kids and you went out into the hall, and sat down on the floor, they'd come right up to you and you could put one of them under your arm and make a very cozy nest, which actually amounts to management. Certainly there are exercises and games that you can do with little kids which would be like insulting the intelligence of the older ones.

If the kids are really off-the-wall, and nothing can happen in the class, you do one of two things: A) Ask the teacher if you can take a small group out. That's probably the better solution. If you can manage it (and you probably can't the first day), take five kids a session down the hall or some place and tell the teacher you're going to work your way through the class. B) If you can't do that, you have to teach the world's most simple lesson. Give them something concrete and interesting to do; something that requires few instructions and no class discussion. I've been in places where you literally have the kids' attention long enough to say only five words. "GET A PIECE OF PAPER." And then they get a piece of paper. "FOLD IT IN TWO." "WRITE THE WORD 'BLACK'." "Write all the things that you can think of that are black." You literally don't give them a chance to do anything except write or whatever, which is not particularly terrific. It has to be an extremely concrete lesson. The kind of class I'm thinking of, which is probably the worst kind in the city, thrives on crisis. Everyday somebody gets thrown out, or somebody gets beat up. So in that kind of situation, my whole object becomes one extremely simple but pleasant activity.

Worsley: One way to regain control of a class that's gotten completely out of control is to walk quietly around the classroom and engage the kids who are most central to the disruption in a private conversation. Try to figure out what the reason for their disruptive attitude is. Often the kids will behave in a hostile manner, and you'll think that they are behaving that way because they don't like you or something, which is not true.

One thing to remember is that things aren't always what they look like. For instance, you have a classroom full of students who are all talking to each other and who might be getting up and running around. You will find that in the middle of this Jackson-Pollock-painting-of-a-classroom there are patterns of focus, thought, and participation. And you can, for instance, talk to a few students who look like they might be interested and get them to start doing their writing. I've seen quite brilliant writing come out of a class which you'd never expect anything to come from. Sometimes the students who look the wildest can sit down for a second and turn in a brilliant piece of writing.

Just because you haven't worked in that kind of environment before, you can't let the chaos destroy your own belief that the kids might be able to do some incredible writing. In some of the schools, many kids have apparently never worked in an environment that wasn't chaotic. But these kids can do an incredible amount of thinking in this kind of situation because they've adapted. And that's good to know, if you're confronted with chaos for the first time.

The first thing to try is to get the students to do some freewriting. It's a particularly good exercise for getting a chaotic class under control. If you can get the freewriting done you've won 90% of your battle—you will have gotten the kids to be quiet at the beginning of the class for three minutes with their pens on a piece of paper. And that's really a good start. First, I stand in front of the class, demand their attention, and wait until they give it to me. I ask them to take their bags off their desks, and to put a blank paper on their desks and to have a pen ready. I tell them not to start writing until I say "GO." Then I start the countdown. While they're writing, I time the exercise, and let them know when there are only thirty seconds to go. I tell them to stop writing after exactly three minutes. Then I say, "Okay, put your papers away and now we're moving along to the next thing." Then I move swiftly to the next part of the program, which might be to present them with a specific writing idea.

Chaos vs. Spontaneity

In this section Ron Padgett and Larry Fagin describe difficulties in establishing and then balancing a "creative tension" in the classroom.

Ron Padgett: When I had first started teaching, too often I let my spontaneity serve no purpose other than its own. After I had worked for several years as a poet-in-the-schools, I came to the conclusion that to teach writing well you have to be highly conscious and spontaneous at the same time. I learned how to lose control of a situation just enough to have the spontaneity of it serve a useful purpose. And the exciting thing was that although I always taught in fundamentally the same way, I also had to adjust the fundamentals each and every moment.

I'm not sure if the following anecdote is an example of that, but it's what comes to mind. I had just started teaching in a junior high. The first two days had gone pretty well. On the third day I was having lunch in the school cafeteria, out in the student section. Some of my students walked over and sat down. I recognized one of them, a girl who had written a good piece the day before. In the course of our conversation, we started talking about possibilities, and I asked her, "Isn't there anything you've always wanted to do, and could have done, but never did?"

"Yes," she said, "I've always wanted to throw a pie in someone's face."

"Well, why don't you? You can throw a pie in my face."

She and her friends were a little shocked.

"But there's a catch. I get to throw a pie in your face too."

We each bought a slice of banana cream pie—whole pies seemed a bit extravagant—and went back to the table, where she mashed one in my face, and I mashed one in hers. I still remember the feeling of meringue above my eyebrows. I also remember laughing and feeling giddy and exhilarated, and glad we had gone through with it, even though it was a risky thing to do. It was the same kind of risk I took sometimes in teaching writing.

Fagin: When I first started working with kids in the Brooklyn Children's Museum Program, Bill Zavatsky and I were the teachers. Bill and I would come in and have maybe a group of fifteen kids, a workable group compared to thirty, but these kids were literally chewing up the furniture. A

typical scene, I'll never forget it, Zavatsky playing the piano, and me leading some imaginary orchestra, and Patsie Coleman, who was about seven or eight at the time, standing up on the table in her mini-skirt doing a dance and everyone screaming at the top of their lungs while she belted out some amazing song she made up, which I was trying to write down. It was a wonderful scene. And each time we came out of there we were sort of awed by the near-violence of the session. So later, when I went into the schools, I thought we could work in the same way. But the minute I got in there, I realized I was not supposed to be doing that. So I went into the schools thinking I could be a little rambunctious and then I learned to control it. I learned how to loosen the class up and then tighten it up. That's a tricky thing, an organic process. The ability to segue between discipline and chaos is magical. It's a high kind of goal that you set for yourself. I don't think it's always possible. When I started going into schools, I had to learn how to calm things down, but I missed a lot of the spontaneity which came with a looser situation.

Rapport With Students

When they start teaching, many writers are afraid the students won't like them. Some think that if they look and act really hip they'll automatically gain rapport with the students. Others are afraid that if they try to be too friendly with the students they won't be able to control the class. In this section the writers discuss how they establish rapport with their students.

Worsley: I think that no matter how you start off with the kids, if you're new, you're going to make mistakes. There's no question that you will. You're going to lose kids and you're going to embarrass yourself. You can expect that to happen.

For example, one year I was working with both elementary school students and high school students. It had been awhile since I had taught high school, and I was a little bit worried. At Christmas a friend of mine who was seven years old gave me a Robot Watch. I liked the watch because it kept perfect time. I lost the band, and so I carried it in my pocket, like a pocket watch. I was teaching in an elementary school in the North Bronx, and when I used to look at my Robot Watch in front of those students, they liked it. They thought it was funny that I had a Robot Watch. It was a little device that gained me some rapport with the kids.

I started the residency in the high school and walked into a classroom full of alienated students who were not at all ready to forgive any little faux pas on the part of their teacher. I gave the freewriting exercise, and pulled out my Robot Watch to time it. These kids looked at me like I was a real crazy nerd from some kind of Star Trek world that they didn't particularly want to get involved in. But eventually we got along very well and they produced great work.

Willis: All people actually learn with the sort of game-like stuff which we do with the little kids. So if you can find a way for adult or college or high school students to get involved in playfulness without insulting them, you'll be glad you did. It's tricky because you can't come on like an elementary school teacher to any of those groups. But if you can actually get them doing something playful, they all really like it.

For example, once I was having high school kids do an

observation exercise, and I felt very silly. I had them observe the feet of somebody in the room, and had them write about feet. And then they had to guess afterwards whose feet they were. That's the kind of thing you could certainly do in elementary schools, but these high school kids also really got into it. What it allowed them to do was some mild insulting of each other, but not in a way that could hurt anybody. Having a funny knot in your laces is not as bad as having warts on your face. They wrote wonderful pieces about each other's shoes and feet and had a wonderful time. If you identify it as silly sometimes they'll just say to themselves, "Okay, let's just do something silly." Often it's enough to just let them know that you know it's silly too.

Worsley: The thing that ultimately establishes rapport with the kids is simply to respect what they think. Of course they're going to test you and you're going to be put through a few little scenes where you're going to have to wonder about how much you or the teacher has to discipline them. Ultimately, once the kids get the sense that you really do respect what they think, you will solve most of your discipline problems.

One way to show respect for what they think is to really listen to them, to really read what they write and to respond with the same kind of enthusiasm with which you would respond to the writing of a good friend—with praise or with criticism—either way they appreciate a realistic, honest, respectful response to the thoughts they express in their writing. Once you establish that you're going to do that with them, then the magic begins to happen.

Another way to show respect for the students is to avoid yelling at them. The longer I go the more I tell myself never to yell, although I break the rule occasionally. If you find yourself in a situation where you might yell, do your best to think of another strategy. The kids will forgive you if you do yell, but usually there's another possible solution.

Presenting Assignments and Classroom Discussions

Many writers wonder which poems to use as models for their assignments, and whether or not they should avoid controversial subjects. Here are some of the guidelines used by the experienced writers I asked.

Fagin: When I present an assignment in class, I prefer to use examples from the works of other students rather than the work of a famous poet. Sometimes the vocabulary adults use is too alien to the kids. Also, I don't particularly like poems written by adults specifically for children. If there's a poem from another kid that I like, I'll use it.

They like hearing work by people their age. They like it partly because they're curious about what other kids write, partly because they can relate to it, and partly because it makes them feel their work is important. They think that maybe I'll read one of their poems to another class. Also, it's a really good way to start a lively discussion.

Unger: With junior high schools kids, I try to avoid bringing in poems that have sexual overtones. I also try to avoid bringing in anything about drugs. They are dangerous subjects because they can divert the students' energy away from writing. Also, sometimes you get poems from some of the kids that end up making them feel embarrassed. They read them out loud and the whole class starts laughing, partly from nervousness. In this situation you can talk about

what they thought was funny, while applauding the writer's honesty.

Willis: I wouldn't avoid any subjects that came up. There are subjects that I wouldn't bring in. I don't see any point in bringing in subjects that are controversial. I remember a long time ago at P.S. 75 there was this guy who was molesting and killing children on the Upper West Side. It was pretty awful, and they were all talking about it all the time. So if it's something that's being talked about all the time, no matter how awful, I would talk about it with any age kid. But I'm not going to bring it in just because child molestation is a big topic.

The tricky part is figuring out when to stop the discussion and start writing. Sometimes they do terrific writing after a kind of bland, quiet discussion because even though I thought it was a failure, they were more interior—you know, working it over. Other times there will be a really hot discussion and that will lead to good writing. Or it will be a really hot discussion and what they really needed was to keep discussing, and I cut them off too soon. I don't think there's a way of knowing. I think that's a thing that comes with time, and you just know that sometimes you can't always tell. In general I don't let discussions run too long. Some people run them a lot longer than I do. I see the kids begin to drift, not necessarily the ten most excited kids, but the kids at the back start to doodle and look away or whatever. So sometimes even if it's still going with the most articulate kids, I'll cut it off.

Writing in Class

I asked the writers what they do while their students are writing, how they respond to the most frequently asked questions, what they do to make sure no one in the class feels left out, and how they handle students who want to produce a perfect paper on the first draft.

Frequently, the novices in our program are baffled when one of the students writes a scathing description of someone who turns out to be a member of the class. I asked our writers what they do when that situation comes up, and also what they do about the students who don't write anything at all.

One day when I was visiting one of Larry Fagin's classes, I noticed that one of the girls was sitting with her head on her desk. Larry said that she was one of the best writers in the class, but that something had happened to her at home, and she was upset. I was impressed with the way he respected her privacy and refrained from drawing attention to her by trying to cajole her into writing. Sometimes kids just have a bad day, and sometimes the stress of their lives interferes with their education. The writers underscored the need to be sensitive to these conditions.

I didn't ask the writers to tell their success stories. Almost all writers who work in the schools come away from a residency with stories about the kid who had bad grades in all of his subjects but turned into a classroom hero because everyone liked his stories so much, or the one who never said a word in class and spoke for the first time during a writing lesson.

In this section the writers discuss the various problems kids have with writing and how to help them write.

Fagin: In the course of a residency I try to spend at least one or two days working on collaborations. I have kids work in pairs and collaborate on a poem together. It can make for

a very good atmosphere in the class.

Another thing I do is to get the whole class to collaborate on a long poem. Say it's a narrative poem in rhymed couplets. I start off in one class and continue in another and finish in a third. That gets everyone in the group participating in one long poem, and they all get to hear the thing in progress.

Willis: Always have one or two things that you can do if you can't do what you originally planned. Making comic books is one of those for me.

Fagin: I emphasize that spelling and neatness are not important during the first draft. I try to show my students that writers make drafts, and I explain what a draft is. I tell them they can cross out words if they want to and explain that later when they get their papers back they can copy them over neatly if they want to.

You can tell them right up front, "I don't know how to spell. I'm not going to tell you how to spell things. You just spell them as best you can, and we'll correct it later when we're copying papers over." I try to get them not to erase. Some of them use pen and white-out which is terribly sloppy and awful. You try to discourage that. Often you get kids writing and then copying their papers over within the period that you're there. That really wastes a lot of time, so they don't come up with very much material because they're too busy making things neat.

If there's a kid who can't write very well, say a third grader, and the other kids are doing all right, it might be a good idea to work verbally with the kid and just take dictation.

Willis: If one of the kids hasn't started writing, I go over to him or her and say, "Do you need help getting started?" Sometimes they say, "No pencil." There are a lot of reasons for them not to be writing. One of the simplest ones is no pencil. Another one is no paper. So you get pencil and paper for them. Another one is, "I don't know how to start." So you start them. Give them the first words or take dictation. Anything to get them started. Sometimes it turns out they don't speak English. And then, if you speak their language, you let them write in their language. Usually they have a good reason. It's not very often just out-and-out defiance.

Worsley: If they're having problems, you answer their questions on an individual basis while the rest of the class is working around you. If you've presented them with an idea, and it's not working, then slip them another one, which might be to write anything they want. They might say, "I don't know how to do that. How do I write anything I want?" You ask, "Well, what are you interested in?" "I'm interested in boys." "Well, write something about boys. What kind of boys?" You can get into a dialogue with the students and get them to write about something they're interested in, even if it's something they think they're not supposed to write about.

Willis: My general feeling is that my students should write with absolutely no censorship. However, I have a rule that they can't read anything out loud to the class if they've written something that might hurt someone else's feelings. If I have a lesson where it's possible to hurt somebody's feelings, if I say, "Let's all describe an ugly person," I would say there are only two rules: one is you have to write at least five things and the other rule is that it can't be a person who is in the room. I try to handle it before the fact by making it a rule. And if somebody breaks the rule I say, "We can't read this out loud because you broke the rule." You don't

have to make a big deal out of that either.

I've been caught sometimes too. I start reading something out loud and all of a sudden this giggle runs through the class. They all know who's being written about, and I thought it was made up or something. But when that happens, I stop and say, "Gee, is this a real person in this class?" And someone is sure to say, "Yes." And I say, "I don't think I want to read that out loud, it might hurt somebody's feelings." Which is the bare truth. Not to condemn anybody, but not to hurt anyone's feelings. Sometimes it's terrific writing. They're so good at insulting each other.

Sometimes when you're working with a small group of friends, they'll all want to start dumping on someone in the class. You can let them do it. You can pretend that you don't understand, and then you just wouldn't let it be made public. You wouldn't publish that one or let them read it aloud. It is important for them to know that they can write anything they want.

Finishing The Class Period or the Residency

When writers start teaching, they eventually have to figure out what to do about the potentially damaging effects of competition. During the workshop sessions there's rarely enough time for everyone in the class to read his or her work aloud. Because as many as a hundred students may be involved in the writing program in a school, it's often impossible to represent the work of each student in the anthology the writer publishes at the end of the residency.

I asked the writers how they deal with the problem of competition. I also asked them what they do to let the school administration know what's going on in their workshops.

Fagin: Besides the actual writing in class, set aside some time for the kids to read their works. I usually leave about ten minutes or more for reading. I have people come up to the front of the class, instead of sitting in their seats or standing by their desks. It's more formal, and they get more attention that way. I stand right next to them and help them when they stumble over words. I remind them to read slowly and to speak clearly. It's a good way to end the class because it gives them a sense of completion.

If you have the students read their work at the end of class, it's important to give everyone a chance to read during the course of your residency. Because there isn't enough time at the end of class for everyone to read, it creates a competitive situation. You don't want to miss anyone who might really want to read. No harm meant, but there is some harm done if a kid feels left out.

Willis: It's a good idea to make sure the principal knows what you're doing during the residency. Every once in awhile pull out one or two poems that you respect and that aren't going to cause any waves, and either take them into the principal's office or leave it in his or her box. If you've published something recently, you might want to give the principal a copy. Don't give them a lot to read, because they are usually very busy and don't have time to go through a huge stack of papers.

Don't go to them with your problems unless it's something very concrete like a scheduling problem. You could say, "Gee, I don't know what's going on, but every time I

arrive the kids have been taken to the gym, and I really don't want to miss my classes." That kind of problem you can take to a principal, although even then the assistant principal is better. But never, never go to them and say, "This teacher is not treating me well."

Fagin: During the residency it's a good idea to talk to the kids about what they are all working toward. It might either be a public reading, a video tape of the reading, or an anthology. Along the way, kids will perhaps copy good papers over, and I'll put them up on the bulletin boards. That's a good way for them to get immediate feedback on their work, and it's a good way to motivate them.

If you don't have enough space in the anthology to publish something from each of the students, you want to make sure the kids who aren't included don't feel that you're putting them down. Sometimes I have the students read into a tape recorder. That way even the ones who aren't included in the anthology get to do something special. They can read their work and hear their own voices.

If I have typed something for the anthology, I might show it to them and tell them it's going to be in the anthology. It's sort of magical to them. Some of them deny that they've written the work because the typed copy doesn't match their handwriting. They say, "I didn't write that," and I say, "Sure you did, here's your name," and I show them their original paper.

Conclusion

Padgett: One day, about six or seven years after I had taught at P.S. 61, I was walking down the street when some fire engines roared onto our block, and the firemen went to work. (I think it was a false alarm, or somebody's roast was burning.) Suddenly, one of them yelled, "Hey, Mr. Padgett, it's me, Hector! From P.S. 61! I still dig poetry!"

Indeed, wearing big boots, a black coat and a fireman's hat, it was Hector. I was amazed, first that the little boy I knew was now a fireman, second, that he remembered me, and third that he still "dug poetry!"

"Nice to see you!" I yelled back. "It's great that you're a fireman."

"Hey, man," he said, pointing to himself with his thumb, "if you ever have a fire, just call me."

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DALE WORSLEY has been teaching in the T&W program since 1979. Several of his plays have been produced around the country, including *Cold Harbor* and *Blue Devils*.

My Perfect Residency

By Sheryl Noethe

WHEN I WALKED INTO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL 391 (I.S. 391) I was told to see Peter Mason, the teacher who was coordinating my residency. I walked down the long winding hallways that were filled with the sound of about fifteen hundred noisy, bustling students. When I found his classroom, he was teaching. I sat in a small office directly across the hall from the classroom and watched him teach. I liked him right away. I could tell he had a sense of humor and a sense of camaraderie with his students. When the bell rang he introduced himself to me. Then he took me around the school and introduced me to everyone. In the following week, wherever I went everyone knew I was the visiting poet and treated me with respect.

I.S. 391 has a school-within-a-school program composed of modules. Each module has four classrooms and four teachers. The teachers in each module work as a team. During the day they can spend more time together than teachers in most other schools. I think this system creates both the family-like atmosphere of the school and the positive, enthusiastic approach the teachers have towards their job and the students. It allows the teachers to work together closely, and to teach each subject in relation to the others. The students get a sense of continuity not only in terms of what they are learning but also socially.

I used the time I had between classes to read my students' work in a small office. In it there was a box of cookies and a refrigerator the students could use to store soda and water. The teachers in the module used to come into the office and ask me about the lessons I was doing that day. I made copies of some of the poems I was using as models and explained how I used the poem for my lesson. I was impressed that these teachers, who were not involved in my scheduled classes, made an effort to use me as a resource for their own classes.

Teachers came to talk to me about poetry, about creative writing, and about how to teach literature so that the students would enjoy learning more about it. One day the principal sat in on my class with a parent. On another day some of the teachers sat in the office across the hallway from my class and listened to my haiku lesson.

The teachers I worked with really understood the meaning of the word "collaborate." They wrote poems, and constantly asked questions of the students and me. They walked around the room looking at the work. Their response to the writing was always constructive. They didn't criticize the writing. We collaborated together during the workshops. One teacher who had a beautiful reading voice was often invited to the other teachers' classes to read poetry. The teachers invited her into their rooms so that the students could hear what poems sound like when they are well delivered.

I asked myself, "Where did they find such great teachers?" Part of the answer is that the school administra-

SHERYL NOETHE's first book of poetry, *The Descent of Heaven Over the Lake*, was published by New Rivers Press in 1984. She has been working in the T&W program since 1983.

tion lets the teachers develop and use the module plan and gives them broad decision-making power in how and what they teach. During my residency the principal was supportive. He dropped by to observe what we were doing and allowed us to do whatever we wanted to do with the program.

Mr. Mason also trains teachers. He showed me some books he had about non-confrontational, non-humiliating methods in the classroom. He explained his philosophy to me and loaned me his textbooks so that I could find out more about it. It seemed like we were always talking about teaching, students, schools and education. The other teacher I worked with, Ms. Bernstein, had not taken the classes Mr. Mason talked about, but she was always interested in our discussions about better ways of teaching. She instinctively used many of the techniques and strategies we discussed, a tribute to her sensitivity towards students.

When I started, Ms. Bernstein told me she was apprehensive about teaching poetry and creative writing. She said she didn't feel comfortable with it, but that she was willing to learn from me. She made copies of my lessons and taught them to her other classes. She showed me their work and asked me to look it over. A few weeks into the program she was teaching creative writing with an ease she never expected to have.

Students who weren't in my classes handed me poems in the halls. Every day more kids knew who I was and why I was there. I felt like a total resource. Although I taught only three classes, I had an indirect effect on nearly every eighth and ninth grader in the module.

At the end of each class I taught with Ms. Bernstein, she asked the students how they felt about poetry now, and about what they'd written—what they had liked and what they hadn't liked. This gave me an immediate sense of the effect of my work on the students.

I got so many good poems out of each lesson that I went home and typed a few pages of them each night. Mr. Mason xeroxed them and handed them out to the students. As always, they were delighted to see their words in print. The pages went around the school. By the end of the week everyone knew we were writing haiku or lists or ways to see things. When I sat in the little office, students dropped by to show me their writing.

When it came time to type up the anthology, I already had the first pages done. This is a good thing to remember—keep up with the work and type it up as you go along. That way, at the end of your residency you won't be living in a nightmare of paperwork. It also generates a lot of interest when the students see their work typed up.

I don't know if it's the age group, or this particular school, or both, but the poetry that the students wrote was so honest and so personal that I was afraid there might be sarcasm and fun-making when we read it aloud in class. Instead the students applauded each other and were entirely sympathetic.

I think this has a lot to do with the fact that the teachers there nurture a supportive, encouraging, and personal atmosphere. They truly care for their students, take an interest in their lives, and treat them with kindness, humor, and compassion. The teachers and students were friends. The students went to them for advice, and the teachers always made time to listen to them and to help. They walked down

the halls with their arms draped over each other's shoulders (yes, teachers and kids!!).

In the lunch room the teachers and I talked about turning teaching from an "occupation" into a profession. These teachers were professionals. I learned more about teaching from this residency than I have in all my other schools. I didn't encounter any burnt-out or cynical teachers in this school. I found vitality, pride, and excellence. They were the

kind of people who did their professional best in their own classrooms, while collaborating with their colleagues to create interesting programs.

I.S. 391 was not a battleground between poor students and angry teachers. This was an ideal situation to flourish in. Especially for me! I left I.S. 391 feeling that the most important job in the world is to be a teacher. ●

The Perfect Residency: Part II

By Peter Mason

POET-IN-RESIDENCE SHERYL NOETHE ARRIVED at Mahalia Jackson Intermediate School (I.S. 391, District 17, Brooklyn) last spring just after Spring break. She met with three classes twice a week for five consecutive weeks. She also worked informally with several other classes.

Before Sheryl arrived, most of the students in Ms. Bernstein's class said they didn't like reading poetry by recognized writers and they didn't like writing their own. By the time she finished her session with this class, their attitude had changed dramatically. The students discovered that they enjoyed writing poetry and reading their work to their classmates very much. Furthermore, when Ms. Bernstein used Sheryl's techniques and ideas with other classes that hated to write, she found that they too became eager to write and to read their poetry aloud.

By writing poetry, several students found they could express the conflicts, anger, and sorrow they had previously suppressed. When they read their work to the class, their classmates discovered that they each had the same problems with friends, family, or school. One girl in particular was able to express in her poetry her deeply felt hostility towards one of her former teachers. She was then later able to speak to the teacher. As a result, the two of them were able to resolve their conflicts. This was a major breakthrough for both the teacher and the student, as well as an unforeseen result of a residency in poetry.

Sheryl's love of poetry and life and her passionate commitment to the students' work manifested themselves in her lively and enthusiastic delivery of the poems she used as models. Her lessons took off like roman candles. For instance, when she taught haiku, the class erupted into a fascinating discussion of Japanese culture, history, traditions, and beliefs. The Japanese ideographs she put up on the board enraptured both the children and the teachers.

Sheryl's direct, honest, and warm approach captured both students' and teachers' interest and involvement. She was so generous with her time and her ideas, that at the end of her tenure, when the students invited her on a trip to Prospect Park and to their senior prom, she went on the trip and danced at the prom.

I.S. 391 is different from other schools Sheryl had worked in. We work in a modular system. Students usually

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take English, mathematics, science, and social studies within a four-room suite which is connected by narrow corridors, and set apart from the rest of the building. These modules invite a degree of intimacy and cooperation rarely found in more traditionally organized schools in which students have to travel up and down stairs to get from one class to another. Our classes are closer together. This fosters a family feeling and a friendliness. Our students tend to be friendly, outgoing, and open to each other and to strangers. Because the module has between 120 and 140 students, and its corridor is narrow, one might think that arguments and fights would be commonplace. In fact, they are rare. When they do occur, they are quickly diffused by the trust and caring generated by the system. Students know that they can find sympathetic ears among the teachers and classmates in their module. They also feel that they are part of a much larger team that includes not only their class, but also the entire module.

When Sheryl demonstrated poems to her classes, we teachers also did the lesson. We then tried the techniques with the classes that did not have direct contact with Sheryl. We also used her lessons when we substituted for absent colleagues. Writing acrostic poems with classes other than our own made coverage periods fly by. Students who did not know us responded readily to these writing lessons. They agreed to the ground rules Sheryl had established—if they wanted to write about a classmate they had to get his or her permission, and they had to be positive. Many a clever, moving, or somber poem emerged.

Ms. Bernstein and I introduced Sheryl to colleagues and administrators throughout I.S. 391. Many of them asked her for suggestions about how to teach poetry. She always helped them.

Sheryl often said "Hello" to youngsters we passed in the halls between periods. They smiled and returned the greeting. Some of them widened their eyes when they recognized Sheryl as the woman who had worked in their elementary school several years before. The eyes don't lie. There was love in them. Some even asked if she was going to be in their classes to do poetry.

Kathy Ruta, the district coordinator who had acquired the funds for Sheryl's lessons, visited us and was impressed by her clear, lively approach, and by the students' enthusiastic response.

The culmination of Sheryl's work with us was an anthology made up of the favorite poems and pen and ink drawings of the student writers and artists. Each student and teacher in the program received a copy of the book. We treasure them. The work is witty, humorous, sad, profound, angry, and loving. At a time when so many people are eager to lambaste the schools and students—especially the inner-city schools—for their failures, this book represents a glittering triumph for both the students and the poet. ●

Variations on the Culminating Event

By Harry Greenberg and Nancy Larson Shapiro

“PUBLISH, THEN PERISH,” A CORRUPT version of the adage, describes the way some teachers and writers feel when the time comes to pull together a student anthology from hundreds of pieces of children’s writing. To share ideas on how to make the *process* less burdensome and the *product* flashier, poet Harry Greenberg presented a workshop to T&W writers recently. Here’s an overview of the ideas exchanged (arranged in categories that sometimes overlap):

The Product: “Methods” that add to the visual appeal

- People *do* judge books by their covers; make the cover attractive, and for a professional look, repeat the cover design on the title page.

- Give the book an overall “look” by tying it together *visually*: e.g., use a *border* on each page, *typeset* certain pieces (such as titles or names), use a *design motif* throughout (such as a fancy first letter for each piece or a graphic pattern repeated periodically—known in the printing business as a “dingbat”).

- Use *press type* (also known as “transfer type” or “rub-off letters”) for titles, names, etc. Press type can be frustrating. Some tips: after using the press type, xerox your page, and use the copies for page make-up. Because old, dried-up press type cracks, always use a fresh sheet of the press type; protect your original pages by spraying them with fixative.

- Get typed pages *reduced* at your local photocopy store. Reductions are inexpensive; they look crisp, sometimes almost typeset; they allow you to get more material on a page. You can also use reductions for variety on the page. But don’t go overboard and make the page tiny and cramped.

- Use *calligraphy* or some form of “fancy” lettering for effect, but use it judiciously. Usually students can do this art work.

- If you need copies of a book for PR, staple most of the print run to save money, but bind a few (most photocopy stores can bind, or you can bind them by hand).

- Since most of us are doing books in black and white only, capitalize on the *contrast* between these colors (especially if you’re “printing” on a photocopy machine). Cut-outs, silhouettes, stencils, or collages work well—simply give students black and white paper. (A black page with white lettering or cut-outs is especially dramatic.)

- Collections of writing are usually enhanced by artwork and students love to illustrate their books. Some ideas:

- (1) pick out objects or places mentioned in the poems or stories and make a list to give kids ideas for drawings;
- (2) hand out different sizes of paper so you get different sized drawings (small pieces of paper help you collect miniature drawings like those that grace the pages of *The New Yorker*);
- (3) for younger children who may not be able to manage a small sheet of paper, you can use a photocopy reduction of their drawing;
- (4) use black magic markers to get good contrast in the drawings.

- Headlines and other type from newspapers and magazines can be cut up and used effectively.

- Stencils can be used for lettering, which can be done by the students.

- Use art work creatively throughout the book—e.g., a poem can be typed *onto* a drawing.

- For picture stories or comic books, give the students paper with the boxes already drawn, and use a variety of box-formats (e.g., one page divided equally into fourths; one page divided in half, with the bottom half then divided in thirds; etc.).

- Black and white *photographs* can be used in xeroxed books—as art work (e.g., silhouettes) or to document the writing experience (classroom shots) or (as in professional books) to give the reader a picture of the writers.

- A *glue stick* is good for pasting down illustrations. Glue stick holds fast, but doesn’t dry instantly; so you can make last minute adjustments and straighten illustrations on the page.

- When getting work typed is a problem, and/or to capture the “feel” of the writing as children actually *write*, have students print or write their own poems or stories. These pages can be reduced and a border added.

- Get students’ *names* on everything they do, and give them credit on art work, layout design, etc. If you do a play, do a playbill with credits for scenery, costumes, etc.

- Use other resources in the school: e.g., work with art classes on the anthology.

- Be on the lookout for inexpensive ways to add pizzazz to your publication: e.g., a saddle-stitch stapler allows you to make professional-looking books. If you decide to saddle-stitch a book, make a “dummy” of the book first; it will help you organize the layout. You can also use different formats: e.g., folding standard-sized paper lengthwise and stapling or gluing the pages makes an attractive tall, skinny book.

The Process: Collecting the work and deciding what gets published

- Keep the writing organized from the beginning—individual student folders work well.

- Decide on some process for selecting students’ work: each student may choose the piece he/she likes best (though the teacher or writer may not agree with the selection); a committee of students may select from submissions contributed by the class or school; the teacher or writer may select the work; etc.

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NANCY LARSON SHAPIRO is the Executive Director of T&W. She is the co-editor of *The Point: Where Teaching & Writing Intersect*.

- Decide your editorial philosophy for this particular publication (a philosophy that can change under different circumstances). For example: are you committed to publishing a piece by *every* student? This may be realistic with a small class but becomes infeasible with many classes or a whole school and only a limited publication budget. The general feeling among T&W writers (who usually work with about 100 students) is that if students are told in advance, they understand that an anthology will have only selected writings and that not everyone will be represented. However, the writers then make certain that *each* student gets to participate in some way in a “culminating event” that showcases his/her writing (see “The Alternatives,” below). A word of caution: be certain that the *same* kids (those who seem to be good at everything) aren’t the only ones getting published.

- All students can assist in the publication if the typed material is available early enough. You can hand out xeroxes of their typed piece, and they can revise, copyedit, and proofread it. If at all possible, material for an anthology should be typed on a word processor so that changes are easy to make, and kids can be encouraged to edit their writing freely.

- Just as you need a selection philosophy, so too do you need an *editing* philosophy — when and how much to change children’s work. Most professional writers value the advice of a good editor, and copyeditors leave very few pieces of writing untouched. Between the extremes of treating every child’s marks as sacred and molding every poem to conform to some ideal, there’s good common sense. Most T&W writers agreed on these points:

- they change spelling and grammar when it’s *incorrect*, but watch carefully for the off-beat (as in Kenneth Koch’s “a swan of bees”).
- they feel that invented spelling is fine for early drafts, but they find that kids want their published work *right*.
- they sometimes edit for “quality” — often by condensing the student’s work. This is best done in conjunction with the student or when there’s time for the student to go over the suggested changes. .

The Alternatives: Events and publications that can add to or replace the traditional student anthology

- *Broadsides* are single sheets of paper, usually with one poem or story; they are often decorated with borders or interesting graphics or illustrations. Each student can do a broadside, and each broadside can be duplicated to make books. Or broadsides can be displayed on bulletin boards or handed out in the halls (there’s a political history to broadsides). (Note: see Nancy Brigham’s book *How to do Leaflets, Newsletters, and Newspapers* in the T&W catalogue.) Broadside can also have a collection of short poems, a collaborative poem by the class, or a series of one-line poems.

- Create *poetry postcards*: you can do this by designating four cards on standard paper (front & back) and having both sides photocopied back-to-back on card stock. A postcard writing day (with postage provided) can get students from other classes excited and involved. You can have students from different classes use the postcards to write messages to each other.

- Students love to create *tiny books* (use left-over card stock or cut pieces of regular paper). You can also create those “flip books” that are read by flipping through the pages quickly.

- *Poetry calendars* are easy to make (just use a standard calendar format and add the writing and art work). They’re also functional: they can be sold to raise class funds or handed out to parents with a school activities schedule.

- Instead of being a multiple-copy book, the class anthology can be a one-of-a-kind book. Each student can create his/her individual book, and copy over one piece for the “class book” or “library book.” This can also work with a scroll format—use a long sheet of paper that can be rolled and unrolled, and students can add poems, stories, and pictures.

- Readings are a good alternative to publication. A reading can be an informal event in a single classroom or a larger event that features the work of many classes. One T&W writer set up a “poetry cabaret” in the school gym, complete with refreshments. Students can form a *traveling troupe*, with older students going to younger classes to read their work or vice versa.

- The school’s *video* equipment can be used to tape readings of work (copies of the tape can be made for kids who want a visual record of their class, or students who own a VCR can borrow the original tape from the school library and watch it at home).

- Children’s writing can be shaped into a *play* or a *dramatic reading*, and different responsibilities can be handed out to all kids: e.g., some are the writers, some the actors, some behind-the-scenes people, etc.

- When you print an anthology, do extra copies of various pages, to be used in a display.

- You can create an anthology that is primarily for parents and other teachers. This can be a short book (say, ten pages) that briefly describes on each page the kinds of experiences students participated in during their writing workshop, with selected samples of student work to show the writing produced. This kind of book allows teachers and writers to share ideas and gives parents a sense of the context in which the students are writing.

- Students can produce their own *chapbooks* using any of the techniques described here. You can add to the professional look of these by adding interesting elements—e.g., an author’s “bio” (get the students to write theirs) or blurbs on the back cover that quote famous writers (dead or alive) who recommend the book to potential readers.

- Sometimes one student does something so special (either a collection of poems or a story) that it warrants a special publication—seize the time if you can and help him/her preserve the work. One T&W writer finds about one student (out of hundreds) each year for whom he creates a special book. T&W writers and other visiting writers: be on the lookout too for teachers whose writing deserves to be published. This is a lasting gift to the student or teacher.

