

Finding My Way In Berkeley

LETSSWork Conference July 2003

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I was ready to take it easy in June, so the idea of a teachers' conference during the last week of our school year seemed a little daunting. Nonetheless, an opportunity to examine student work and broaden my teaching approaches really attracted me.

Thankfully, I arrived exactly on time for the dinner meeting after feeling my way around Berkeley with my suitcase. I was happy to see Linda Wharton. She was a great site partner and we shared experiences as middle school English teachers in Baltimore City.

Our first task after meeting some Writing Project teachers was to freewrite about an object which connected us to our homes and teaching environments. I wrote about a Kleenex – for all the colds and allergies our students and teachers had battled over the year. The teacher next to me from St. Louis understood immediately what I meant. It was fantastic to find like-minded teachers with whom to share professional experiences and insights.

LETSSWork stands for “Learning Essentials from Teacher and Student Work.” The institute collected over 40 Writing Project teachers nationwide in order to consider teacher research, to use structured dialogue sessions (protocols) which examine student work in a constructive way, and to plan how to incorporate these inquiry tools into our local writing project sites. We had a huge notebook of research articles to work through and protocols to practice. All of this seemed familiar from my experience in Del Arnold and Jim Ford’s MWP course

“Teacher as Researcher,” but focused more on student work

and ways to formulate questions and teacher research opportunities. In a group of five to 10 teachers, an anonymous piece of student work was observed and commented on. The group looked carefully at what the student had accomplished and was trying to achieve. Finally, the group members shared various ways to address the student’s learning. By using this protocol, every teacher sees qualities of his or her own students and is able to benefit.

Of course, coordinating teachers to participate in this kind of professional exploring is key. At LETSSWork, every teacher brought a wealth of commitment and experience and diverse views. We were given the research tools and four days of time with facilitator support to think and learn together. How great this would be all year long at all our Writing Project sites! It would mean interested teachers committing to an inquiry group over a period of time. I know this is difficult to fit in, but it would be an invaluable local thinktank for all of us. Teachers learning from other teachers in a non-judgmental space makes sense. Linda and I are scheduling several protocol opportunities this coming year. Come and participate and help us connect as professionals to observe and strengthen our teaching practices.



(l-r) Emma spencer, T-C, Phi/WP and Linda Wharton, T-C '91.