

Fishing, Pushing, and Reading the Weather: the Work of a Site Director

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When I think about my work as co-director of the Maryland Writing Project, I realize that mine is an amalgam of many roles: detail person, cheerleader, advocate, wheeler-dealer, facilitator and entrepreneur. More than that, a certain image emerges: I am like a fisherman with several poles in the water at any one time. Besides knowing how to read the weather, tides and direction of the wind, I have over the past 10 years learned to sense where and when the fish are running, what bait to use, when to reel in the line, and when it's time to pack it in and go back to port until the weather clears. When unexpected squalls hit, I have learned how to batten down the hatches and repair frayed lines. And always, I understand the value of my crew, and that I would never go out to sea by myself.

Ours is an established site (since 1981) with an especially strong pool of Teacher-Consultant leaders. Annual reviewers comment on the degree to which our T-Cs are involved in the work of the site, and on the wide range of continuity programs. Indeed, when Barbara Bass and I prepare the Inverness Site Survey and the annual continuation report, we are floored by the variety and breadth of our programs. No wonder we get tired sometimes!

But what is the essence of that work? What, really, does a site director “do?” Project direction is often invisible, taking place in front of a computer screen. This fact — together with being so close to the work — makes deconstruction that more elusive.

I am thinking, for example, about my behind-the-scenes role in helping make our site's first professional writing retreat become a reality two years ago. The idea began with one of our T-Cs. Terry Mobley is the director of our Student Writers' Workshop and a long-time colleague and friend. Ever since he had returned from the NWP Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe in June 2001, he and I had periodically discussed a site-based professional writing retreat. As a writer, retreats and writing support groups have long sustained me. Both Barbara and I share a love of writing and believe in the importance of peer response to our work. We always encourage the formation of T-C writing groups and “coffee houses” (RAGs) throughout the year. In addition, for the past several years, we have attended a spring weekend retreat (Deacons' Wives) with other T-C writers. In short, Terry's enthusiasm found a sympathetic audience. We encouraged him to write a newsletter article about his experience at the NWP professional writing retreat.

Then in November 2001, Terry was our T-C “guest” to the NWP Annual Meeting, an honor we reserve for T-Cs who have demonstrated exceptional leadership and service

to the work of our site. He attended a session facilitated by Joe Check of the Boston Writing Project. Joe was encouraging sites to offer their own professional writing retreats. After the session, Terry was all fired up, telling me that he “definitely” planned to work on a local professional writing retreat.

While I nodded in agreement, I took his statement with a grain of salt. Over the years, experience had shown that some of our T-Cs' ideas do not come to fruition, not for lack of enthusiasm, but because of the time and effort involved in getting the work done. Inevitably, professional and personal lives demand that priorities be set. Nevertheless, two weeks after the NWP meeting, I received an e-mail from Terry: “Linda, I'm determined to plan a writing retreat that roughly replicates the Santa Fe Retreat, and I need others to push me.” He also wrote: “School and upcoming holidays, home projects, etc. demand much of my time, so the writers' retreat could easily just fade into the background if I don't block out some time and get started.”

Terry's candid call for help left me feeling both compelled and conflicted. I did a quick mental inventory of the other “lines” already in the water. But since mine was the first name listed in the e-mail, followed by several others who'd previously expressed interest in writing retreats, I knew that Terry was specifically reaching out to me. From our past working relationship with the young writers' camp, he knew that I might be able to give him the needed “push.”

After I e-mailed him back with encouraging words, events moved quickly. Terry and the others wrote: “Let's meet!” I suggested dinner at a nearby restaurant, since it seemed wise to capitalize on the T-Cs' energy. The group agreed online that we should e-mail a few other T-C leaders to join us at this preliminary meeting. As we always do when a new initiative is getting underway, Barbara and I discussed the implications to the site, and agreed that — for this one — I would be primarily involved in overseeing the retreat's progress.

Five T-Cs attended the dinner meeting: Terry, Rus VanWestervelt, Sarah Snyder, Stephanie Leddy, and me. We discussed the format for a retreat, whether or not participation ought to be restricted, whether applications needed to be completed. We talked about scheduling, location and attendant costs — all fundamental issues. At this juncture, it seemed important to me that the wider T-C membership be able to provide input, too. I suggested that Terry and the others attend our annual T-C Leadership Retreat in January

to pitch the idea. It was clear that, if possible, everyone at the dinner meeting wanted to take part in the first retreat.

At the Leadership Retreat, Terry shared some materials from the NWP Santa Fe retreat and explained the overall concept of a professional writing retreat. A larger interest group then formed and decided on another planning meeting in early February. While they mentioned the possibility of having the retreat as early as that spring, I explained the unlikelihood of finding a venue with such short notice and — depending on what the group decided — spreading word via listserv or direct mailing, to all our T-Cs. I offered my home for the next meeting.

At that meeting, the group decided to aim for a fall retreat and cap participants at 10. (In addition to the original group that had expressed interest in attending, we picked up a few more people at the Leadership Retreat, bringing the number to six.) We agreed that this would be the “group” for our pilot retreat. From past experience, I knew that appropriate and affordable locations book up fast, and it was already February. In addition, I knew that my own schedule would soon be extremely hectic, with logistics for the Summer Teacher Institute and Student Writers’ Workshop just around the corner. With that in mind, I also asked whether someone at the meeting would take charge of retreat registration. While no one committed to that task, three T-Cs did agree to research a site. Two weeks later after a series of e-mails back and forth — and just when I started to get nervous — someone found a perfect location. I called the place, put a preliminary hold on a weekend in September, and e-mailed the group with that information.

Now the issue of cost and our site’s support of T-Cs came into play. Although we hadn’t specifically earmarked NWP money for a professional writing retreat — not having known the previous fall when we did the budget that one of the T-Cs would bring this particular idea to the table — I felt strongly about site support to help offset the cost of food and lodging. The total cost per person for the weekend was only \$150, but even that modest amount might prove problematic for some of our T-Cs. This — plus our site’s commitment to the project — led me to discuss the issue with Barbara. I proposed two things: first, that the site would pay for one-half of each participant’s expenses; secondly, that when we prepared the budget for the *following year*, we consider setting aside a generous line item for a professional writing retreat. Barbara readily agreed.

I wrote a letter to let the T-Cs know about our site’s financial support. In that letter, I included a lodging reservation form. When the T-Cs received my letter, everyone immediately responded with effusive thanks for the financial help, and sent in his or her small share of the

expenses. Certainly, the message that our site valued T-Cs’ professional writing was not lost on anyone. In August, I sent out another short letter to the group, along with some last-minute logistical information and a map to the center. One person had to back out, and after discussing alternates with Barbara, I contacted another T-C whom we both knew enjoyed writing. That person leaped at the chance.

Meanwhile, I had been making all the arrangements with our contact at the retreat center. She had needed a certificate of insurance from the university, which I had obtained through Financial Services. She had also required a deposit of 10%; all such checks must be issued through our university working fund. I secured the check and dropped it in the mail. In a separate e-mail, I asked Terry whether he would be willing to serve as facilitator for the weekend. He agreed, with the stipulation that everyone be involved in planning the shape of the weekend, and that decisions be made on Friday evening after dinner. In the meantime, one of the participants dropped me a note and mentioned that Friday evening was her 60th birthday, but she was still attending. I notified Terry, who promised to bring a cake for Lynda that night.

According to all reports, the weekend went beautifully. Family responsibilities kept me from attending the actual retreat, but Barbara was able to show our support by driving down for Friday dinner (and birthday cake!). The following week, I received phone calls or e-mails from each person, thanking me for making it happen. And it was unanimous: the MWP Professional Writing Retreat would be a tradition! The participants wanted to return the following fall, if possible.

Someone wrote an enthusiastic article for our next newsletter. Subsequently, two of the six were accepted into the NWP Professional Writing Retreat for summer, 2003. Each participant has since published professional articles in either our own site newsletter, or in *The Voice* or *The Quarterly*.

As a site director, I know I was instrumental in helping make things happen. However, the alchemy for the work of a writing project lies in the teachers, in *their* chemistry, in *their* energy. For example, the inspiration for our professional writing retreat came from one of our T-Cs. True, without the site directors’ philosophical and practical support, (including the commitment of financial resources) who knows what might have transpired? Fortunately, we don’t have to speculate: our *third* annual professional writing retreat is slated for April 29, 2005. This time, 10 T-Cs will be attending, their weekend underwritten by the funds set aside in our NWP grant.

Call it fishing, call it pushing, call it reading the weather — whatever it takes to empower T-Cs — well, that’s the work of a site director.