

To ISI and Beyond: Defining the Mission of Teacher-Consultants

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In the last few weeks, I've received wonderful news from so many MWP Teacher-Consultants about life after the Summer Institute. I hear about the great presentations Donna, Jody, Cindy, and others are giving all around the state; Ed fires an email to me, telling me to pick up the latest copy of *The Urbanite* to check out his recently published piece; Corey comes back from presenting collaboratively with other teachers at the NCTE convention, thrilled to share what he's doing with on-line forums that zoom our classrooms and our students' ideas around the world.

These are just a few examples of the many contributions that MWP-T-Cs are making throughout the year. It makes no difference if you went through the Institute in 1987 or 2007; each summer, 20 individuals make the choice to sacrifice a month of their precious vacation to change their lives and the lives of their students. It is an experience that turns writers into authors, specialists into experts, teachers into consultants.

And for that month, when you are insulated in that protective cocoon with others taking similar risks, pursuing the answers to the burning questions that can no longer be ignored, you become invincible. Many of you will understand when I say that it becomes your *Querencia*, your wanting-place, where strength and confidence emanate from the moments when you turned off the engines, stopped the maddening whirlwind, and let the muddy waters settle. The clarity that comes from emerging into this *Querencia* is nothing short of wondrous and magical. You want to hold on to it, keep it close to you as you enter the new school year as a Teacher-Consultant. For many of us, we find the courage to believe (perhaps more than we ever did in our earliest years of teaching) that we have the answers to make a difference, a real change, where it is so desperately needed.

We know, though, that once we leave the cocoon, it's hard at times to hold on to that determination and even the belief that we can, indeed, make a difference. We are challenged with the obstacles of NCLB, of state-mandated tests, and of system-specific benchmarks that steal away our workshop time, our read-around gatherings, our publishing parties.

It doesn't have to be this way. In fact, as we gear up for a new Invitational Summer Institute (ISI), we're letting our Fellows know that what they do after the Institute is even more important than all that they will accomplish during the month of July. Far too many T-Cs have gone through the Institute driven by acing the "class" rather than mastering the material to benefit others in a pedagogical setting; these individuals—wonderful in their own right—miss the whole point of what it means to become a Teacher-Consultant. It is not our goal to encourage our Fellows to ace the class. It is our goal to have each of them develop a better sense of who s/he is as a writer, as well as an educator. And, as a natural extension of that epiphany, how s/he can better help our students and other teachers across the state. Mastering and sharing best practices does not result from completing a class that some might consider terminal. These three weeks, two weekends, and countless impromptu gatherings at Bateman's and Starbucks are a *beginning* to a whole new way of writing and of teaching, as much for ourselves as for our students and colleagues.

Here's what you can do, then, both for yourself and for MWP. First, hold near and dear three products from your ISI experience: your daybook, your position paper, and your presentation (not to mention the presentations of your fellow T-Cs). Don't stop writing in your daybook, keep your personal philosophy on the teaching of writing visible and accessible at all

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times, and put those best practices to the test in your classroom as much as possible.

Second, get involved with any of the many programs and events sponsored by MWP. There's more to do than you can possibly imagine. Whether you teach at Towson, facilitate or present workshops anywhere in the state, coordinate seminars and retreats, or design your own special publication that fills a need, you are fulfilling the expectations of what it means to be a Teacher-Consultant with the National Writing Project.

Just in case you need a constant reminder, however, you can simply remember MWP-T-C as a handy reference to keep that focus long after you emerge from that summer cocoon and head back to the classroom. Contributing in any one of these areas is a wonderful way to stay involved, both for you and for the Project.



Rus VanWestervelt, Nina Shipman-Vick, and Cornelia Vanderlain, coordinators TU ISI 2007.

M-Marketing

The Writing Project is always in great need of advocates for our programs that benefit both teachers and students. This can be done on various levels; whether it is networking in your school, spreading information to students about the student writers' workshops or to teachers about ISI, or joining us in Washington, D.C. for our annual Lobby Day marathon, letting others know about the programs and the opportunities offered by MWP is essential to our ongoing success.

W-Writing

One of the key components to ISI is developing the writer within so we can be better mentors to our colleagues and to our students. Many T-Cs arrange, facilitate, or attend local and regional writing retreats for both professional and personal writing projects. Ask yourself: What are your needs, right now, in your school or your community? How can you apply the skills and strategies you have learned as a Teacher-Consultant to address those needs? How can writing contribute to a solution? Pursue any of these questions and let us know how we can support you!

P-Publishing

Writers write, authors publish. Not only do we need to get our own words out there in print, we need to encourage our student writers to do the same and show them how it is done. So whether it is a 400-word vignette on growing up with cancer or a 3,000-word, referenced article on the metacognitive approach to writing toward healing, we need to publish and promote the publishing of writing by others. You can do this in your school newsletter, your local tabloid, or any one of the many education journals that are eager to disseminate cutting-edge strategies in the teaching of writing. You can even publish a book—a novel, a collection of short stories, or even the strategies you use in your classroom right now. What about online? Got a Blog? A Wiki? What about a Moodle? Never before has it been so easy to self-publish and share your writing with a larger community. Jump in and get published. Your writing matters.

T-Teaching

Our motto, "Teachers Teaching Teachers," is at the heart of our mission. When we graduate from the Institute and become Teacher-Consultants, we are empowered to go anywhere in the state (and the country, for that matter) to teach other teachers how to motivate students to write well. We do this in our own schools when we share strategies that work or when we help new teachers discover solutions for unlocking a child's potential to share an engaging and important story. We also do this in sharing our best practices at MWP-sponsored workshops, in-services, and conferences held on an ongoing basis around the state. We take those best practices on the road to NCTE and NWP conventions in other parts of the country, presenting with other T-Cs who have been engaging their students in similar ways. We do not gather for a month in July to share our strategies in a vacuum; we gather to launch those strategies to teachers who are in need of them, whose students will benefit from them, whose administrators will embrace the results from them. We are consultants in the field of teaching writing, and we will never diminish the importance of teaching teachers what we know to be true, to be necessary, in every classroom in America.

C-Collaborating

Finally, the energy that is created from the collaborative efforts when T-Cs gather is astounding. It is essential to collaborate with fellow T-Cs, discuss what is working and what is not, analyze the up and coming trends in the teaching of writing, share your findings on the Six Traits, the writing process, and writing to learn. Dig out your MWP directory and email five of your colleagues that went through the Institute with you and share with them what you are doing to promote the effective teaching of writing, in your school and beyond, and check out what they are doing as well. Pull together a team of T-Cs who teach in your content area and seek out new ideas and strategies. Keep the ideas flowing among you, regardless of how much time has

passed since you emerged from your ISI cocoons, and share ideas, feast on new concepts, celebrate breakthroughs. When it comes to that writing energy, you've got to give a little to get a lot.

We're all out here, thousands of T-Cs just waiting to be a part of something great. So don't hesitate to market, write, publish, teach, and collaborate. Be proud of being a Teacher-Consultant, and make the decision to live up to the rights and privileges of bearing such a prestigious title. We look forward to hearing from you!



New Teacher-Consultants, TU ISI 2007.