THE WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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Adolescents in the United States have become increasingly involved in activities that trouble their sense of well-being and, in some cases, place their lives at risk. At the same time, regressive and reductive calls for school reform in this country are not only gaining currency but also alienating large numbers of students from schools. As these events unfold, teachers are being asked to prepare themselves to reform the practice of education in professional development programs that do not speak meaningfully to the challenges they face in classrooms.

The Write for Your Life Project (WFYL), developed in response to this set of social and educational problems, invites teachers and students at sites in ten states to develop, in dialogue, inquiry-based literacy curricula designed to address what students perceive to be challenges to their health and well-being in their local communities. Students use the English language arts to identify, research, seek funding for, conduct and evaluate service learning projects that address these challenges. Teachers and students involved in the project across the country consult

with one another, primarily via electronic conversations conducted on WFYL Project teacher and student listservs.

In this dissertation, after I present contextual material, I discuss the WFYL teachers' listserv conversation. The log reports of that conversation--what I call an electronic dialogue journal--represent five years of dialogue in which WFYL teachers developed a strong sense of community by affirming and confirming their goals for the WFYL Project and the importance of the network in which they have developed productive patterns of leadership and a shared understanding of what makes their network valuable to them. Within the network that WFYL participants created on-line in dialogue with one another, teachers have offered one another what the literature identifies as "authentic" professional development opportunities. In so doing, I argue, they have offered our profession an example of professional development that appears to support classroom teachers in their daily practice, and they have offered teacher educators an example of how contemporary technology may be used to enhance in-service teacher education.

David, Megan and Matt:
There aren't words to say
what I think you already know—
our hearts are one.

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Until I engaged in the work, I never fully appreciated what a community effort a dissertation is. Although I take full responsibility for any shortcomings in the manuscript, I attribute its strengths to five years of personal and professional dialogues with not only those mentioned above but with countless other generous, insightful teaching colleagues who continue unselfishly to share what they know and do with others.

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INTRODUCTION

The Write for Your Life Project: A Response to Shared Concerns and Understandings

> It is my view that persons are more likely to ask their own questions and seek their own transcendence when they feel themselves to be grounded in their own personal histories, their lived lives. (Greene, 1978, p. 2)

> I start with the idea that literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances, but the ability to participate fully in a set of intellectual and social practices. It is not passive but active, not imitative but creative, for participation in the speaking and writing of language includes participation in the activities that make it possible. (White, 1983, p. 56)

> If men [sic] are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. (Freire, 1972, pp. 61-62)

David Schaafsma, Patricia Lambert Stock, Jay Robinson and I (and occasionally we had the good fortune to be joined by Dixie Goswami) began meeting in early 1993 to frame a grant proposal to the Bingham Trust for a project that Patti suggested we name Write for Your Life (WFYL). The name seemed apt since we planned to engage students in writing meant to address the myriad ways in which students' health

and well-being were at risk in their local communities. Our intention was to frame a project that would improve student literacies as it addressed health-related issues of immediate and serious concern to them. We also shared a common belief that students and teachers can have a profound, positive influence on the cultures in which they live and learn, inside and outside schools.

Each of us had worked in urban secondary schools, and our concerns and understandings were influenced by experiences we had in those settings (see, for example, Stock and Swenson, 1997; Stock, 1995; Swenson, 1994; Schaafsma, 1993; Robinson, 1990). Those experiences explain some of the beliefs we shared about teaching and learning, students and teachers, classroom and community cultures that surfaced, first, in the grant proposal we prepared; later, in the project we developed; and eventually, in the evolution of the project as we collaborated with students and teachers in ten states.

Initially, however, two overriding concerns prompted our efforts: we were distressed that adolescents in the United States have become increasingly involved in activities that trouble their sense of well-being and even place their lives at risk; and we were distressed that many of the most regressive and reductive calls for school reform were not only gaining currency in our country but also alienating large numbers of students from schools.

We planned the WFYL project as a response to these concerns and were gratified when the project was funded by the Bingham Trust and Michigan State University, with additional support from The University of Michigan, The University of Wisconsin, and many of the local school districts that have come to house project sites (see Appendix A for a listing of project sites).

Since its inception, the WFYL project has spread from the three states in which we established it to five states in its second year and to ten states in its third, fourth, and fifth years. During its first five years, project teachers and students have taught and learned from one another in teachers' semi-annual meetings; classroom collaborations between public school project sites and their university partners; letter, publication, and video exchanges; workshops; campus visits; and particularly through regular electronic mail listserv conversations. Involving teachers and students from fifth-grade through graduate school; from urban, suburban, and rural school districts; from low-, middle-, and high-income communities; from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups, the project has become a hothouse for both curriculum and teacher development and a generative place for all of us involved to reflect on our beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning.

After grounding my discussion of the project in both demographic information about students' lived lives that is of concern to educators and competing theories of teaching and learning that are being advanced in our multicultural society, in this dissertation I treat the WFYL project as a case study in the larger movement to engage teachers in critically reflecting on their own and one another's theoretical and pedagogical beliefs and practices, a necessary process if educational reform is to serve better the needs of the society in which we live. Implicit in my discussion in the first chapter of this essay are my convictions that language arts curricula are best developed in direct response to the needs, interests, and abilities of particular students in particular settings and that language arts curricula are best developed from the materials of students' presently lived lives.

However, although I am convinced that language arts curricula must be responsive to and developed from the material conditions of students' lived lives, I am also persuaded that those of us who are K-12 teachers and teacher educators must not abdicate our responsibility to prepare students for complex post-school lives, lives which may be lived in settings far different from the ones in which

students go to school, lives that will take students into communities beyond school walls. How we, as English language arts educators, interpret and enact this responsibility is responsive at least in part to how we respond to, interpret, reflect on, and enact public calls for educational reforms that are often in direct conflict with one another. After working with WFYL teachers and analyzing our electronic conversations over the last five years, I am persuaded that teachers who regard teaching as a focus for their own and their colleagues' inquiry and who engage in *sustained* dialogue about what they do, how they do it, why they do it, and the aims they have in mind as they make individual and collective pedagogical, theoretical, and curricular choices are engaging in the type of critical teaching that a nation entering the "Information Age" and the twenty-first century require. Reflecting on the WFYL project in which I have been a participant and an observer in a particular site, a co-director across sites, and a theorist, I draw upon examples that are both specific and general to support my convictions.

The multiple roles I have played in the WFYL project have provided me multiple perspectives from which to analyze the work I discuss here. Those multiple roles have also complicated my ability to speak about this work. At one and

the same time, I speak as a participant in the project (one of the teachers about whom I write) and as an observer of the project (a project co-director, a teacher educator, a critical voice in the educational reform movement). How do I honor the K-12 teachers and the teacher educators in the WFYL project as I wish to do because they have earned my professional admiration over these past five years without appearing to be self-serving? After all, I am one of them. How do I criticize the work of WFYL K-12 teachers and teacher educators as it is my habit to criticize my own work without appearing to be inappropriately critical of my colleagues? I wish at the outset to acknowledge this tension in my representation of the work I discuss here. As co-director of the project, I wish to say loudly and clearly that in this dissertation I mean to celebrate and honor the work of WFYL teachers. I also mean to say that as one of these teachers I mean to reflect critically the work my colleagues and I did together: to make no claims about his work that are not justified by evidence to which I can point, time and again.

And so I begin: After establishing the context and rationale for the development of the WFYL project in Chapter One, and the methods I used to conduct my study in Chapter Two, in subsequent chapters, I examine electronic mail

dialogues in which Write for Your Life teachers established a site for generative, critical conversations, conversation in which we inscribed personal reflections and conducted dialogues. In these e-mail conversations, teachers developed and taught one another how to realize inquiry-based, dialogic, literacy curricula grounded in issues of concern to students in their classrooms. With reference to literature about the professional development of teachers and the ways in which individuals learn how to establish generative dialogue through dialogue, in Chapters Three and Four, I demonstrate how what I call the WFYL *electronic dialogue journal* reveals generally recognized characteristics of healthy networks and "authentic" professional development. I argue that one method of scaffolding the substantive changes in teachers' beliefs and practices is to support opportunities for teachers to participate in learning communities that continue over extended periods of time and are themselves inquiry-based projects focused on the teaching of inquiry-based curricula. I conclude with some observations that might inform the practice of those of us who work in English education and wonder about the roles that technology might play regarding professional development for English language arts teachers, professional development that

is created and enacted in what the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1990) might recognize as a "zone of proximal development," I link these observations to others that I offer about authentic curriculum development and educational reform. My concluding reflections may be understood as my response to a question something like this one: What have English educators to learn from a literacy development project in which school and university teachers reminded one another in regular "virtual" meetings of both their goals and aspirations for teaching and learning and the realities of the communities and the schools in which those goals and aspirations were to be realized by individuals with hopes and histories?

CHAPTER ONE

Educational Reform and the Write for Your Life Project

Ours is a time of dramatic social and economic change, and as has been the case in other such times, the institution of public education has come under scrutiny and is being called upon to re-form itself as a means of solving society's problems. To no one's surprise, currently suggested reform agenda reflect a range of alternative, often antithetical, philosophical and theoretical beliefs about education—and particularly about literacy education since students' abilities to comprehend and compose texts effectively is of concern in every area of study.

Despite conflicting agendas, most reform initiatives have at least one thing in common: calls for change in teachers' practice. Substantive reform of American public education will require that teachers construct new understandings about their roles and work and change their instructional practices congruently.

Some of those who write disparagingly about the role of teachers in educational reform cast teachers as willful recalcitrants who know *what* changes the public wants and know *how* to reform their practice, but for some reason choose not to accommodate the public's requests. Such a

position fails to acknowledge that many of the suggested reforms are incongruent with one another and/or with the particular students or settings within which teachers work.

Since the suggested reforms state or imply a variety of values and educational outcomes, reforming teacher practice, a precursor to reforming public education, necessitates not only the transmission of information related to educational theory and pedagogy, but also opportunities for teachers to undertake two related sets of activities. First, teachers need opportunities to sort through the complex ethical, cultural, and social forces that shape their students' understandings, their students' communities, and their conceptions of their work with students; second, they need opportunities to look at their work both globally (at the ends of the educational experiences they are helping orchestrate for their students) and locally (at the daily practice of education in particular places at particular times with particular students).

Teachers committed to changing their practice in the interest of beneficial educational reform are offered guidance from reform agenda with emphases at least as various as the following ones:

Developing Lifelong Learners Who Find Learning Meaningful

More than two decades ago, Alvin Toffler (1970) noted that the "information explosion," the generation of new knowledge which was increasing at an exponential rate, would necessitate better methods of information processing as well as more selective consumption of information. Toffler was among the first of those writing for the general public to suggest that learning to learn was at the very least as important as learning a discrete body of information and very likely it was more important. Today, many note that students will change careers a half dozen or more times during their work lives and that they will need to develop an aptitude and desire for lifelong learning to keep up with the changes that technology will continue to introduce at ever-increasing rates.

However, it is not only the rate of information generation and consumption that is at issue, but also the implications of this "information overload" for the development of an informed citizenry that is critically active in the creation and development of an informed and morally responsible body politic. Perhaps never has the need for capable workers and humane citizens been more apparent than now when technology, "outsourcing," and "downsizing" are changing the nature of work as we have

known it in the industrial era, and when the moral and ethical fiber of our citizenry is under such unflattering scrutiny.

As students journey through adolescence, they will need to think not only about how they will make a living, but also about how they will live a life (Benjamin, 1998, p.7-10). They will need to begin to define themselves and the relationships they will have in their families, their neighborhoods, their communities, and their nation.

Along these lines, proponents suggest that students and teachers must be offered opportunities to develop vision, to view their lives and learning as a journey rather than a destination. If we are to progress as individuals and as a nation, perhaps we should, as Sartre (1961) suggests, name the "real and present factors which condition [our days]" moving toward something that isn't yet, but which could be—what Sartre calls our individual "projects"—"certain object[s], still to come which [we are] . . . trying to bring into being" (p. 91). Sartre suggests our "projects" might be to repair something we find lacking in ourselves or our surroundings. However, these lackings—these ways we wish ourselves or our surroundings to be but are not yet—must be identified before our projects can be taken up.

These moves toward naming what isn't but should be begin with the self. As Dewey (1902) suggests:

> [S]elf and interest are two names for the same fact; the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists (p. 408),

and Schultz (1991) suggests it is from such introspection and interest we are able to spiral out to concerns about community: "[H]uman beings who lack an awareness of their own personal reality (which is futuring, questing) can not exist in a 'we-relationship' with other human beings" (p. 8).

If, as Bob Peterson (1991) reminds us in "The Complexities of Encouraging Social Action," "[i]n a society that professes democratic ideals, one of the key purposes of the public school system is to foster participation in civic life," (p. 40) schools must become places where students and teachers

> pose searching questions with respect to what works upon and conditions them . . . [and then] recognizing lack or deficiency . . . they may learn how to repair or transcend (Greene, 1978, p. 19).

Along the same lines, Maxine Greene (1978) reminds us that,

> The roots . . . of democratic education are to be found in the conviction that human beings can achieve autonomy and efficacy once they learn to inquire, to communicate, to use cognitive capacities" (p. 8).

And she prompts us to acknowledge the necessity of becoming morally active in the world, of asking "why":

> The 'why' may accompany a sudden perception of the insufficiencies in ordinary life, of inequities and injustices in the world, of oppression and brutality and control. It may accompany, indeed it may be necessary, for an individual's moral life. The opposite of morality, it has often been said, is indifference—a lack of care, an absence of concern. (p. 43)

These reforms emphasize the value of engagement of the learner in initiatives that make personal sense to them and that benefit not only the individual learner, but the broader community.

Helping Students Make the Transition from School to Work

William Brock (1992), who chaired the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), validates the need for lifelong learners; an informed, involved citizenry, and the development of lifestyles that are personally meaningful. Although some educational reformers view as demanding and desirable a curriculum and pedagogy in which the teacher prompts students to move quickly through a large body of material to gain superficial understandings, Brock and those who sat on the SCANS committee offered an alternative view. In the preface to that report and in response to numerous reform initiatives, Brock notes:

> The SCANS message, in short, was not delivered in a vacuum but in the midst of an intense national debate about education and training, their purposes, and the progress to date. Each of these efforts has a different focus, and all of them recognize that schools do more than prepare young people for work. But these efforts are all of a piece—elements in a broad nationwide effort to link education to the real world. All seek a particular kind of learner, one who can put knowledge and skills into practice as a productive worker, a responsible citizen, and as a more complete human being. (p. v)

In *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance*, the SCANS (The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) report, Brock and other authors—who represented such businesses as IBM, Motorola, GTE, General Electric, Aetna Life and Casualty, Gannett, RJR Nabisco, and MCI Communications and such labor organizations as the AFL-CIO and the UAW (1992)—propose these as appropriate goals for students' learning:

- Resources: Students allocate time, money, materials, space and staff
- Interpersonal skills: Students work on teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, and work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds
- Information: Students acquire and evaluate data, organize and maintain files, interpret and communicate, and use computers to process information
- Systems: Students understand social, organizational and technological systems; monitor and correct performance; and design or improve information
- Technology: Students select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, maintain and troubleshoot equipment

- Basic Skills: Students read, write, do arithmetic and mathematics, speak and listen
- Thinking Skills: Students learn, reason, think creatively, make decisions, solve problems
- Personal Qualities: Students assume individual responsibility, develop self-esteem and self-management, sociability and integrity (p. xiv).

Those representing the Department of Labor's perspective on education tend to emphasize the "uses" of education—that is not "learning for the sake of learning or for personal satisfaction," but "learning in order to facilitate more effective doing." They also emphasize student-centered educational experiences in which students are cast as "expert." School-to-work reforms also acknowledge the importance of a focus on communication that is sensitive to the growing ethnic, social, and cultural diversity of the country. The reforms speak not to mastery of finite bodies of information, but to the mastery of enabling systems and processes.

Improving Adolescent Health, Well-Being

The condition of young people in our country is cause for concern to those who work in many fields. It is not surprising that researchers and practitioners from fields as diverse as anthropology, biology, economics, education, health care, law enforcement, psychology, and sociology are working to understand and help the ever-increasing numbers of students growing up in single parent households,

reaching puberty at younger ages, living in poverty, studying in decaying schools, contracting AIDS, witnessing episodes of teen violence, attempting suicide, and joining gangs (see, for instance, Schoff's "Annotated Bibliography of Selected Publications on the Adolescent Years" in Takanishi's *Adolescence in the 1990s: Risk and Opportunity*, pp. 207-215).

Neil Postman (1995) expresses his incredulity when confronting the magnitude of adolescent health concerns as he notes the demographics Americans find in their daily newspapers:

> Can it be true, as I read in *The New York Times*, that every day 130,000 children bring deadly weapons to school, and not only in New York, Chicago, and Detroit, but in many venues thought to provide our young with a more settled and humane environment in which to grow? Can it be true, as some sociologists claim, that by the twenty-first century, close to 60 percent of our children will be raised in single-parent homes? Can it be true that sexual activity (and sexual disease) among the young has increased by 300 percent in the last twenty years? It is probably not necessary for me to go on with the "can it be true's?" Everyone agrees and all signs point to the fact that American culture is not presently organized to promote the idea of childhood; and without that idea schooling loses much of its point. (pp. 195-196)

Although some may disagree about whether the disturbing statistics Postman notes can be correlated with children's up-bringing in one- or two-parent homes, few will disagree with Postman's observation that the youngest

and most vulnerable of our citizens are growing up in a culture in which their lives and sense of well-being are regularly assaulted. Many of us, however, will disagree, with his contention that "without that idea [of childhood] schooling loses much of its point." To the contrary, we would argue that when children are reared in a culture characterized by the distressing occurrences and opportunities Postman names, schooling is doubly important, for it must not only prepare students to live in their communities, but it must also help them to change conditions surrounding them and to develop alternative behaviors and lifestyles. Some view these constructive and reconstructive goals for education as the original purposes of "mass schooling." De Castell and Luke (1988) note that schooling was originally designed to address concerns regarding rising levels of "crime, poverty, and immorality" (p. 162), and Fred Hechinger (1992) encourages the development of curricula aimed at change in these terms:

> While many adolescents do emerge from those turbulent years in good health, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, too many others are permanently damaged and many die—victims of an adult assumption that little can be done to alter their deleterious course. (p. 21)

While Postman names several threats to students' well-being (violence, single-parenting, sexual activity and resultant sexually-transmitted diseases), Hechinger (1992) stretches our understandings of the risks that confront our youth:

> In the 1990s, the state of adolescent health in America reached crisis proportions: large numbers of ten- to fifteen-year-olds suffer from depression that may lead to suicide; they jeopardize their future by abusing illegal drugs and alcohol, and by smoking; they engage in premature, unprotected sexual activity; they are victims or perpetrators of violence; they lack proper nutrition and exercise. Their glaring need for health services is largely ignored.
>
> By age fifteen, about a quarter of all young adolescents are engaged in behaviors that are harmful or dangerous to themselves and others. Of 28 million adolescents between the ages of ten and eighteen, approximately 7 million are at serious risk of being harmed by health- and even life-threatening activity, as well as by school failure. (pp. 21-22)

Educators such as Joan Kaywell (1993), concerned with the broad set of issues that cultural critics like Hechinger outline, have developed resources (in Kaywell's case, annotated reading lists) to help young people learn more about the problems they face. Kaywell prefaces her text, *Adolescents at Risk: A Guide to Fiction and Non-Fiction for Young Adults, Teachers and Professionals*, by explaining her reason for creating it:

> [It] grew out of my increasing concern about the problems confronting today's youth. There are so many problems affecting adolescents these days

> that a separate term *at-risk* has emerged in the literature. All teenagers are *at-risk*, some more so than others. (p. xiii)

Kaywell's observation that *all* teenagers are threatened, not just urban or low-income youth, is an important one.

While I may find some validity in the pedagogical arguments of educational reformers such as Postman and E. D. Hirsch (1996), who claim that a common reading program helps young people to enter and recreate a public with shared values and understandings, I would argue that the potential consequences of choosing not to address the issues facing adolescents in this nation in curricula designed to speak to the physical and ethical challenges they face daily are too great to be ignored. As I will demonstrate later, offering students an opportunity to translate these challenges into subjects of inquiry and community service does not preclude opportunities to engage them in studies of literature that affirm, cross, and—in some cases even—connect communities.

Proponents of an emphasis on educational reform that acknowledges the real and present threats to the lives of adolescents argue that reform initiatives are likely to be moot if we do not acknowledge and address the threats to students' physical well-being.

During the time in which I have composed this essay, my hometown newspapers have reported the injuries or deaths of more than a dozen students as a result of situations that might have been avoided: alcohol-related car accidents, drug use, gang-related violence and suicide. The youth involved came from inner-city, low-income neighborhoods and from affluent, suburban neighborhoods. During this same time, the national media have focused public attention on mortal violence in schools and school-related events in Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Oregon.

Those who keep events like the ones to which I refer above always in view argue for curricular and pedagogical changes that place student physical health and emotional well-being at the very heart of their suggested educational reforms. I would suggest that it is not just because they are practicing educators, but it is because they position themselves as adults responsible for creating an environment in which children can learn and grow in safety that they view student health and well-being as central issues in educational reform. I place myself among these educators who regard personal safety as a foundational right of all our nation's children.

Serving the Nation's Diverse Student Population

Financial, legislative, and corporate power in this country has belonged primarily to Anglos. It is understandable considering their historical positions of power that well-positioned Anglos believe they have been reasonably well served by curriculum and pedagogy as these have been enacted during the last century. While this relative satisfaction with the ideology of traditional schooling does not speak to the concern that privileged members of our society have expressed about education's failure to prepare a globally-competitive workforce, it does create a resistance to fundamental educational change and a desire to "conserve" instructional methods and materials that have served those citizens well. When calling for reform, the citizens often call for the renewed commitment to or reinstatement of educational practices that constitute an imagined lost ideal. Others, with other histories, call for other kinds of change. They remind us that, "By the year 2010, as many as 38 percent of Americans under the age of 18 will belong to minority groups" (Schwarz & Exter, 1989, p. 34).

Many of the students in classrooms today identify with racial, ethnic, or linguistic communities whose experience

with schools and schooling have not led them to financial, legislative or corporate power. For example:

> Black men, who make up just six percent of the U.S. population, are now three percent of college student enrollment and 47 percent of America's prison population. (Hodgkinson, p.3)

It is understandable that members of those communities are questioning the predominant curricula, pedagogies, and philosophies of the past.

Lisa Delpit (1996), an African-American educator, reminds us that historically American schools have not served all children equally. She argues that ". . . children of color, particularly African-American children, [are being educated] in what for them are often alienating environments" (p. 5). National and local statistics documenting student drop-out rates by ethnic group support Delpit's argument. When children choose to leave an educational setting, it is likely that there is something in that setting that children find inhospitable. For example, curricula with which they are unable to identify or to connect position students as outsiders, as strangers, in classrooms in which they are asked to learn.

Alternative classrooms would be ones that offer students learning opportunities that begin with the

familiar, opportunities that allow them to view themselves as members of the learning community. Classrooms in which curriculum is composed dialogically invite students' membership and commitment (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 1983; Stock, 1995).

In *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez (1982) reminds us that even when accomplishment opens classroom doors for students from historically disenfranchised communities, these students do not necessarily find themselves comfortable in those classrooms:

> The scholarship boy reaches a different conclusion. He cannot afford to admire his parents. (How could he and still pursue such a contrary life?) He permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education. And to evade nostalgia for the life he has lost, he concentrates on the benefits education will bestow upon him. He becomes especially ambitious. Without the support of old certainties and consolations, almost mechanically, he assumes the procedures and doctrines of the classroom. (pp. 48-49)

When calls for school reform come from both historically privileged and historically underprivileged communities, urgency can become a powerful tool. Change is likely to occur rapidly and cosmetically when powerful individuals ignite their calls for the preservation of culture with inflammatory warnings that the nation is losing its position as a financial, political, and

industrial power, that it cannot support increasing numbers of citizens with little or no financial and political resources. Change is likely to be slower, more radical when those in power realize that everyone loses if society's institutions serve only the few. When too few of the members of a society have a vested interest in its preservation, reform is often no longer an option for redressing its shortcomings and failures.

Although calls for educational reform are emerging from all corners of our society, those given greatest attention currently ask us to look back, not forward, to the means of change. The media tout "evidence" of students' inability to read and write at "age-appropriate" levels, evidence that disproportionately implicates children from minority groups. Rather than interpret this assessment as implicating past educational practices, practices at best unsuccessful with large numbers of students (see, for example, Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Fecho, 1992), the media and the public have called even more vociferously for a reversion to past materials and methods in the classrooms.

Elspeth Stuckey (1991) notes the "violence" of these conclusions about literacy attainment and their potential implications for educational practice.

> . . . [L]iteracy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within given populations and against individual people. The third world is oppressed by the system of literacy of the first world; ghetto blacks are oppressed by the American system of literacy education; and a second grade girl is oppressed by a teacher who fails to understand the craziness of the spelling of vocabulary words. Literacy oppresses, and it is less important whether or not the oppression is systematic and intentional, though often it is both, than that it works against freedom. Thus the questions of literacy are questions of oppressions; they are matters of enforcement, maintenance, acquiescence, internalization, revolution. Which is to say that when societies dissolve the forms of oppression against their own citizens and against other societies, then they will dissolve the questions of literacy also. (p. 64)

And it is not only children of color or children whose cultural or linguistic heritage distinguish them who too-frequently find American classrooms inhospitable places. The number of children living in poverty in this nation has grown exponentially over the last decade. Jonathan Kozol (1991) in his text *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* and Bill Moyers (1997) in the television documentary *Children in America's Schools* chronicle in print and video images of the harsh realities many children face when they are born into low-income families. As a

growing body of literature documents conditions in which many children are educated, a national naivete about systematic inequities and the kinds of curricular and pedagogical changes needed to make schooling meaningful and worthwhile to poor students makes such changes increasingly difficult to implement and maintain.

Students living in such conditions don't have the luxury of such naivete. As the Moyers' documentary demonstrates, by the time they reach secondary school, students are moving across school communities if for no other reason than to attend sporting competitions. At these events, they can't help but notice that some students have access to better resources than others.

Those who advocate reforms based on concerns related to equity note that to think that a "one-size fits all" curriculum and uniform pedagogical approaches will serve racially, ethnically, and linguistically heterogeneous student bodies is neither responsible nor realistic. Nor is it realistic to think that such a curriculum and such instructional practices will serve equally well in classrooms equipped with current texts and the latest technological support and classrooms in which students wear coats to stay warm and share texts that are outdated.

Asking teachers to ask students to ignore the realities of their lived experiences and to study what is alien and remote, as Delpit (1996) suggests, is apt to alienate students from the school. Educational reformers might well consider that whatever differences educators and the public have regarding philosophy, pedagogical approaches, or curriculum, we can all agree that we cannot teach children who do not come to school.

I would argue that curricular and pedagogical initiatives that invite students—regardless of race, ethnicity, first language, or family income—to view themselves as valued and valuable contributors to classroom learning communities hold some promise of addressing educational shortcomings and injustices. They hold some promise of engaging students' in their learning—a development which most critics agree must occur if American education is to fulfill its promise. Initiatives, like these, which invite students to use their literacy not only for their personal benefit but for the benefit of others in their home and broader communities seem not only reasonable but perhaps essential to the future of our democracy.

It has been my privilege to work in one such initiative, with colleagues who share my conviction that

schooling must prepare students to become lifelong learners, to exercise effective civic literacy, to work gainfully in the 21st century, and to live healthy lives in harmony with diverse others. At the outset of our work together in this initiative—the Write for Your Life Project—my colleagues and I decided that we needed to teach and learn from one another how to develop curricula and instructional practices that would allow us to be the teachers we wanted to become, the teacher we believed our students and our democracy require. A small core of us began our inquiry-based project together in 1993. I describe that project here in some detail in order to provide a context for my subsequent discussion of the electronic mail conversations in which we teachers prepared one another to realize multiple versions of the Write for Your Life curriculum in classrooms across the country.

The Write for Your Life Project

Write for Your Life is an adolescent health and literacy project initially funded by the Bingham Trust and Michigan State University in 1993. The project began with several sites in Michigan and Wisconsin, joined shortly thereafter by a site in Virginia, and with university partners in Michigan State University, The University of

Michigan, and The University of Wisconsin. The project soon expanded to include sites in ten states (see Appendix A for a complete listing of WFYL project participants and affiliations).

Teachers associated with the project invite students to use the events and circumstances of their lived lives as subject matter for reading, writing, listening, speaking and community service projects designed to enhance their personal literacies and to improve the quality of life in their home communities. Participants have ranged from fifth-graders to university students and teachers. Sites have been established in various subject area courses with sufficient latitude to allow students to engage in self-defined, health-related inquiries and investigations, and to propose, engage in, and evaluate projects that address needs that students identify in their communities. Since WFYL's inception in 1993, most sites have been located in English language arts classes in grades six through twelve.

Designed to offer students a "postmodern" education, the project's goal is not to transmit information, but to enable students to make meaning of their experiences. In the reading and writing of fiction and non-fiction, students identify personal and cultural experiences that

become the focus of their own phenomenological, poststructural, hermeneutical, and interpretive study.

Semi-annual conferences and cross-site conversations via electronic mail have allowed K-12 teachers and university teachers to teach and learn from one another how to realize the Write for Your Life curriculum. In these meetings and conversations, we have by grounded our discussions in specific situations, issues, and questions arising from our work.

Most school teachers in the project are partnered with local university faculty members each of whom not only participates in one or more classrooms but who also coordinates field trips to the university campus and makes resources—including other university faculty—available to students as they conduct their research. In addition, faculty members arrange for student conferences and publications in order that students may share their research and writing within the larger WFYL community. They provide another set of eyes and ears to interpret student progress and direction and work with classroom teachers to identify relevant professional materials for teachers' use and appropriate curriculum materials for students' use.

Composing Our Lives

Literacy is a social construction, and an individual accomplishment. Individuals read and

> write, or don't, and individuals do with their literacy what they can. The subjectivities of minds and the ways in which people make their lives and thoughts, and the ways in which people are coerced, entrapped, colonized, or freed, must be addressed as processes. At the same time, the processes must not become the issue, since the conditions for any process, and especially for the literacy process, determine the possible outcomes. That is why, for example, teaching literacy depends on the circumstances rather than on the textbook. Our attention needs to be focused on the conditions in every instance.
>
> A theory of literacy is, thus, a theory of society, of social relationship; and the validity of a theory of literacy derives from the actual lives of the people who make the society. It is not the case that literacy provides the key to understanding the connections of a people; it is the case that literacy provides a view from which to survey the history and future of social formation. (Stuckey, p. 64)

Students in Write for Your Life classrooms begin the academic year by reading and writing in order to (re)collect their experiences in texts. Students are often encouraged to name their own writing topics, but teachers also provide such general topics as the following:

- Write about an important day in your life.
- Write about your journey to school today.
- Write about a time when you or someone you know had a health problem.
- Write about your neighborhood.
- Write about your dreams for the future.
- Write about a day you would wish to relive.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1986) explain, in part, the reasons for these prompts that teachers provide WFYL students at the beginning of the school year:

> From a processing standpoint, expressive writing would seem to have the following characteristics (a) readily available content so that heuristic search of memory is not required, (b) little need for intentional framing of the discourse since content may be adequately presented in the form given to it in memory, and little need for goal-related planning since the goal of the activity is to a large extent realized through the very act of expression. All of this serves to explain why expressive writing should be easier for novices than other kinds of writing. . . . Thus there is reason from an instructional viewpoint to regard expressive writing as a preliminary or bridge to other kinds of writing. (p. 793)

Writing invitations are most often interspersed with opportunities to read fiction and nonfiction accounts composed by other teens who are dealing with what are generally viewed as adolescent concerns. Bakhtin (1981) speaks persuasively for the reasons that underlie this practice when he reminds us that the students who enter our classrooms come with an "internally persuasive discourse"—a discourse "backed up by no authority at all and frequently not even acknowledged in society" (p. 342). In a very real sense, WFYL classrooms take shape as a field of struggles between this internal discourse and a more traditional "authoritarian/authoritative discourse." The result is that, more and less fully, students in WFYL classrooms develop new and individual understandings of their own places in the world.

Finding Themes in Our Own and One Another's Lives

For educators who share a concern for young Americans' health and well-being and who are persuaded that inquiry-based curricula foster students' learning, the temptation can be strong to eliminate these first two curricular steps: encouraging students to compose fictions and non-fictions that focus on their concerns and returning to those student texts to identify and name the themes embedded in them. Many adults feel confident that they can name for the students in their classes the issues that put students' health and well-being at risk. Often, adult composed lists *are* similar to student lists, but the invitation and process in which students engage in the composing and naming of their concerns are essential to their development as independent thinkers. Paulo Freire (1990) explains the dangers inherent when these important processes are omitted:

> Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanization. (p. 39)

A tenet of the WFYL curriculum is to position students as collectors and creators of a sufficiently large and diverse corpus of self-constructed texts that they may "mine" their compositions for themes related to adolescent

health and well-being. With reference to these texts, teachers ask students to answer questions such as these:

- Can you identify the risks to your or your friends' health and well-being as these risks are represented in your writing?
- What are the health-related risks you or your peers are experiencing in your lives?

WFYL teachers invite students, as they look at their own and one another's work, to move away from "taken-for-granted" understandings of their experience and to question what it means to be adolescents in their individual communities. The work is both difficult and essential. As Greene reminds us, "Learning is a process of effecting new connections in experience, of thematizing, problematizing, and imposing diverse patterns on the inchoateness of things" (p. 3).

Teachers not only acknowledge the socio-historical, cultural, and community influences of the naming process, but they also attempt to make the naming itself an area of inquiry and of action—of research meant to explore the socio-historical, cultural, and community construction of the issues students have named. In so doing, they help students to move beyond the interests and concerns of "me," the object of external forces, to "I" and "we," the agents of internal and external change. Maxine Greene (1991) puts it this way:

> Making an effort to interpret the texts of their life stories, listening to others' stories in whatever "web of relationships" (Arendt, 1974, p. 184) they find themselves, they may be able to multiply the perspectives through which they look upon realities . . .; they may be able to choose themselves anew in the light of an expanded interest, an enriched sense of reality . . . . Seeing more, each one may be more likely to become 'a network of relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 1967a, p. 456) and perhaps be more likely to act in his or her achieved freedom to cut loose from anchorage and choose anew. (p. 12)

Researching Our Choices and Our Communities

> I start with the idea that literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances, but the ability to participate fully in a set of intellectual and social practices. It is not passive but active, not imitative but creative, for participation in the speaking and writing of language includes participation in the activities that make it possible. (White, 1983, p. 56)

The acts of questioning, speculating, researching, reflecting, revising, renaming, and re-searching are recursive until students feel they have isolated a topic that is of real concern to them. At this point in the learning process, students are encouraged to define and clearly state an "issue" and to imagine how they might begin to study and understand the dimensions of the issue. Helping them do this, teachers ask students questions such as these:

- Can you state clearly and define the problem in your particular community that you wish to explore further?
- Who feels this is a problem? Do some feel it isn't a problem?

- Can you determine the "history" of this problem in the community?

- Can you clearly state and identify the need(s) of the affected group of students in your particular community?

- How could you conduct additional second-hand (print) research of this issue?

- Have any community groups or individuals already attempted to address this issue?

- How could you conduct primary community-based searches (interviews, guest speakers, surveys, case studies, field trips, etc.) for information on these issues?

By working to name issues, words, ideas, conditions, and habits that are central to their experience, students are encouraged to use language to define themselves, their communities, and one another. By critically distancing themselves from their experience and turning problems into questions, they are encouraged to think about the authentic relationships between composing, comprehending, interpreting, reflecting, and acting.

As Freire noted, however, conscientization was never meant to be an end in itself; it was meant to result in meaningful *praxis*.

Applying the Research

Ten years ago, V. V. Davydov (1988) noted:

> Of great value in both scientific and practical respects, would be the pedagogical-psychological investigation of the reciprocal relation between learning activity and the productive labor that pupils undertake together with adults. This problem has

> received precious little attention by developmental and pedagogical psychology in the Soviet Union, although the development of learning activity is closely tied precisely to productive activity. (p. 34)

Luria (1982) observed similarly:

> . . . one must seek these origins [of conscious activity] in the external processes of social life, in the social and historical forms of human existence . . . not in the depths of the human 'soul' or in the independently acting mechanisms of the brain. . . . Rather we are operating in an entirely different sphere—in human's actual relationship with reality, in their social history, which is closely tied to labor and language. (p. 25-27)

The Write for Your Life curriculum finds its uniqueness in the way it positions students to name the subjects of their inquiries and then to become researchers of those subjects. That important contribution—positioning students as researchers inventing a discourse—to the field of language arts education was made when David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (1986) who—acknowledge their indebtedness to William Coles (1988) and Theodore Baird (1983)—asked their "basic reading and writing" students in the University of Pittsburgh to inscribe personal experiences—to remember, write, read, reflect, discuss, question, and revise their writing, their memories, and their understandings, and, in so doing, to learn what it means to become an "expert" on a particular subject (p. 89). Building on Bartholomae and Petrosky's contribution, Patti Stock and her colleagues in Saginaw,

Michigan (1995), positioned students as critics and social activists. The WFYL curriculum builds upon the work of Bartholomae and Petrosky and of Stock, inviting students' engagement in what Davydov (1983) terms "productive labor" or what Luria (1982) suggests are "the external processes of human life. . . which [are] closely tied to labor" (p. 27).

Unwilling to displace the modern sense of schools as places that prepare students to assume places in the political and economic lives of their communities, WFYL teachers offer students the opportunity to apply the understandings they develop to community life. When students have collected, studied, and reflected on sufficient data that allow them to think both deeply and broadly about the issues they have selected for study, WFYL teachers encourage them to think about how they might use their newly developed "expertise" to benefit their peers and communities. They encourage students to answer questions such as these:

- Do any community service projects suggest themselves?
- If you have identified and studied a health-related problem in your community, how might you and your colleagues productively address the problem or one of its components?

With Vygotsky (1978), WFYL teachers feel strongly that: "The best method [for teaching reading and writing]

is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations" (p. 118). For older students, their "play" consists of creating and implementing community service projects which function as what Edelsky (1986) calls "authentic literacy events," literacy events of personal and significant meaning.

WFYL teachers are well aware of the problematic lives that students in their classes lead, lives in which home cultures are often not appreciated in the dominant culture in which expediency—getting what you want now—has taken the place of nobler values. Influenced by texts such as Maxine Greene's *Releasing the Imagination*, teachers work to enable students to use any of a number of approaches, including artistic performance, to find meaning and purpose in their lives and their learning. In the WFYL project, service learning functions as a kind of "performance," another way of seeing and influencing structures, hierarchies, and patterns of authority.

Planning and implementing service learning projects allow students to use language to look at language and in so doing to look at social relationships at a particular time, in a particular place, influenced by particular socio-economic conditions. In WFYL classrooms, students study the function of language not the "essence" of it. In shaping meaningful purposes for their writing—to explain, to persuade, to move their audiences—students learn the

ways in which language can and does function at particular times, in particular places, for particular audiences and purposes.

As public outcries for the "moral" education of youth become louder, educators like those involved in WFYL are reconsidering how curriculum and pedagogy that engage students in social action can inspire them to learn the lessons customarily learned in school. Volosinov puts it this way:

> The 'social' is usually thought of in binary opposition with the 'individual' . . . . Notions of that sort are fundamentally false. The correlate of the 'social' is the 'natural' and thus 'individual' as natural, biological specimen. The individual, as possessor of the contents of his thoughts, is the person responsible for his thoughts and feelings—such an individual is a purely socioideological phenomenon. Therefore, the content of the individual psyche is by its very nature just as social as ideology, and the very degree of consciousness of one's individuality and its inner rights and privileges is ideological, historical, and wholly conditioned by sociological factors. (p. 34)

In the course of their reading, writing, discussion, and development of community projects, WFYL students construct their individual psyches, their notions of individuality and communal identify as they work for the good of the broader community.

Searching for Funding

Having imagined projects which have ranged from publishing their own texts for other students to developing school recycling projects, from performing dramatic

readings and enactments of their writing to producing brochures focusing on such issues as substance abuse, students compose grant proposals to a quasi "Write for Your Life Foundation" —composed of the directors of the project and other, selected readers—to support projects that require financial backing. When they do so, students typically answer such questions as these:

- Can you clearly define the problem you plan to address?
- Can you clearly state and explain the methods of your project (What you will do)?
- Can you clearly state and explain the goals and objectives of your project (What will you try to accomplish)?
- Can you clearly explain how you will determine whether you have met your objectives (How you will evaluate your project)?
- Can you clearly explain how much your project will cost and give an explanation of each line item in the budget?

Consistent with current understandings of "best practice" in composition pedagogy (see, for example, Britton 1975; Coles, 1978; Flower, 1998; Moffett, 1968), students work together to draft and refine for "publication" pieces of writing that have clearly defined audiences and purposes and are composed in a genre valued beyond the school walls. Once composed, these writings are "evaluated" for both their language use and their thoughtfulness by a variety of others: students who serve

on non-profit community foundation teen advisory boards, other project students and teachers, project directors. When complete project proposals appear to be plausible and doable, they are funded. In this way, students are able to see how their literacy can work to effect changes they wish to make in the world, students witness one way in which their literacy may be concretely "valued." As Delpit (1996) observes: "Actual writing for real audiences and real purposes is a vital element in helping students to understand that they have an important voice in their own learning processes" (p. 33).

The Community and the Write for Your Life Project

One of the most recent developments in the WFYL project is the requirement that sites find matching resources for those student projects that require financial support. This initiative was undertaken for two reasons: one was to make project funding stretch as far as possible; the other, and more important reason, was to invite communities to recognize the value of the work students are undertaking, the effective use of their literacy (reading, writing, listening, thinking, speaking) and the improvement of the health and well-being of community adolescents. Write for Your Life project teachers have come to realize that community support means community investment in its

young people just as students' service learning means young people's investment in their communities. Inviting the broader community to collaborate with students and teachers in common projects means initiating dialogues which may not have existed previously. And there is much promise in such dialogue. As Apple & Beane (1995) note: "The feelings of frustration, and sometimes cynicism, that many educators and community members experience are often the result of not hearing each others' stories" (p. 22).

Reflecting on and Evaluating the WFYL Experience

After students have conducted research and community service projects, they are encouraged to revisit their earlier reflections and actions in the light of questions such as these:

- What do you know now that you didn't know before?
- What can you do now that you couldn't do before?
- Are you different as a result of participating in this project?
- Did you consider this a valuable experience? Why?

Having experienced educational invitations that have seemed disconnected from their lives, WFYL students generally express a sense of relief that the work they have undertaken has "significance" to them. To use an overused term, they feel "empowered" by the opportunity to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them in the broader world, ways that affirm their many kinds of

experiences and that validate them as "experts" and as "expert evaluators" of their own work. As Apple & Beane (1995) suggest, they engage in not only a literacy and health curriculum, but "a kind of 'hidden' curriculum by which people learn significant lessons about justice, power, dignity, and self worth" (p. 13).

For teachers, WFYL is an approach, in a world far too rich and full for us to "know" it, let alone to "teach" it to others, that allows students to become increasingly aware of their own lived situations—and to develop a vision not only of what is, but of what might be.

WFYL teachers are guided by the conviction that a dialogic, inquiry-based curriculum—particularly a curriculum focused on students' serious concerns—is valuable, even essential, in the current era. As Irene Ward (1994) explains:

> The various types of dialogue—internal, students/text, student/student, teacher/student, and student/public audience—are all necessary for the development of students as competent writers who can produce written documents capable of carrying on the work of a literate society. (p. 201)

Convinced that developing and realizing such a curriculum is not easy in a society that often closes its eyes to the problems of its young people, WFYL teachers are committed to expanding and diversifying educational

opportunities in a way that will invite more students to take learning seriously.

At the outset of our participation in the project, each WFYL teacher was generally aware of the broad backdrop of educational reform philosophies against which our efforts would play out. Each shared the same federal mandates; however, each was also situated in a particular community—a community composed of students, a school facility, teacher and student materials, colleagues, administrators within and outside the building, geographical communities, community agencies, and local and state mandates. Some of us worked in communities in which the needs and characteristics of individual learners are not always considered as important as mandated curricula. Some of us worked in communities that didn't always share our value for cultural diversity. Inevitably, as WFYL teachers attempted collaboratively to change our own and one another's practice, each of us was influenced by the variables that construct the synergistic systems in which we worked.

The Write for Your Life Project: A Summary

The Write for Your Life project is rooted in the work and thinking of philosophers of education like Maxine Greene and John Dewey. It is also indebted to the work of

Paulo Freire and Eliot Wigginton. A WFYL approach shares the characteristics of Paulo Freire's work that Ira Shor describes: It is participatory, situated, critical, democratic, dialogic, multi cultural, research- and activist-oriented, affective and addresses desocialization (1987, pp. 33-34).

It is what Eliot Wigginton (1989) calls a "style of education" (p. 20) guided by these ten principles:

1. All work teachers and students do together must flow from student desire.

2. Connections of the work to the surrounding community and the real world outside the classroom are clear.

3. The work is characterized by student action rather than passive reception of processed information.

4. A constant feature of the process is its emphasis on peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork.

5. The role of the teacher is that of collaborator and team leader and guide.

6. There must be an audience beyond the teacher for student work.

7. The academic integrity of the work must be absolutely clear.

8. The work must include honest, ongoing evaluation for skills, content, and change in student attitude.

9. As the year progresses, new activities should grow out of the old.

10. As the students become more thoughtful participants in their own education, our goal must be to help them become increasingly able and willing to guide

> their own learning, fearlessly, for the rest of their lives (pp. 26-28).

In keeping with the characteristics of Freire's work and the principles that guide Wigginton's work, the locus of learning in a WFYL classroom shifts from the teacher to the student. Students become the researchers and the researched in their studies rather than the recipients of teachers' work; in WFYL classrooms, teachers work as knowledgeable, experienced collaborators in the learning process, capable of extending, directing, redirecting, and informing student research and learning.

WFYL teachers agree that genuine learning involves *praxis*, the application of learning to the problems of everyday life. This recognition means that they work to help students see the useful purposes of their learning and that they work to prepare students for full integration and participation in a broader community.

Although WFYL teachers share similar theoretical and philosophical orientations, they expect the curriculum they are developing together to look different in different locations. Not only are they aware that the lived lives that students explore will differ, but they are also aware that particular places influence the way literacy is learned. Language not only constructs communities but it is also constructed by communities. Difference is a constant across sites.

In prompting students to move beyond classroom walls, to become active participants in the broader communities in which they live, to gain the literacy skills that will help them gain access to communities' resources, WFYL teachers believe they are helping students to learn how powerful language and learning can be.

To realize as fully as we have been able our ambitious plans and goals for the WFYL curriculum, participating teachers in the project have created professional development opportunities for ourselves and one another. In the process, I have learned an important lesson about the ways in which teachers teach and learn about practice apart from more traditional venues such as graduate course work and inservice education—a lesson I try, here, to share with other English educators.

In the Write for Your Life Project, we teachers have leaned heavily on one another in order to learn from one another, holding fast to this advice Camus (1968) offers in "The Almond Trees":

> We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again—give happiness a meaning once more. . . . . Naturally it is a superhuman task. But superhuman is the term for tasks men [sic] take a long time to accomplish, that's all. Let us know our aims, then, holding fast to the mind. . . . The first thing is not to despair. (p. 135)

CHAPTER TWO

Creating Professional Development Opportunities in an Electronic Network Culture

> Most of the in-service or staff development that teachers are now exposed to is of a more formal nature; unattached to classroom life, it is often a melange of abstract ideas with little attention paid to on-going support for continuous learning and changed practice. (Lieberman, 1996, p. 187)

> For the kinds of change necessary to transform American education, the workforce of teachers must do three tough things more or less at once: change how they view learning itself, develop new habits of mind to go with their new cognitive understanding, and simultaneously develop new habits of work—habits that are collegial and public in nature, not solo and private as has been the custom in teaching. (Deborah Meier in Mark Larson, 1997, p. 3)

> The aim is to find (or create) an authentic public space . . . one in which diverse human beings can appear before one another as, to quote Hannah Arendt, "the best they know how to be," . . . to cultivate, in the full view and with the help of colleagues, a consciousness . . . of what *ought* to be, from a moral and ethical point of view, and what is in the making, what *might* be in an always open world. (Greene, 1988, p. xi)

An Emerging Research Agenda

Some research is serendipitous. As the researcher focuses on one set of phenomena, another set edges its way into her view, requiring her attention. As it happened, just such a situation developed for me as a participant-observer in the Write for Your Life (WFYL) project. Originally, my research in the project focused on curriculum development, enactment, and WFYL students'

accomplishments in the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit.

At the outset, mine was an ethnographic study. I was a participant-observer ethnographer, co-planning an action-oriented literacy curriculum with colleagues and observing students: threats to their health and well-being that emerged in their writing, reading, and conversations; the ways in which they were developing multiple literacies; the primary and secondary research they were conducting into the community-specific adolescent health risks they named; and the methods they were developing to address those concerns. Put simply, my action-research project was directed toward the development of literacy instruction aimed at improving adolescent health and well-being. My research in the early days of the project was conducted in a fashion made popular in educational circles by the influential work of anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (1973 and 1981) and Shirley Brice Heath (1983), and the teacher-research work of practicing teachers like Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean (Mohr and MacLean, 1987).

Beginning in 1994, thanks to two outstanding colleagues who let me do so, I participated, on a bi-weekly basis, in the WFYL classrooms of Detroit sixth-grade teacher Toby Curry and eighth-grade teacher Kevin LaPlante. As a participant in these classrooms, I collected artifacts that ethnographers collect: field notes, transcripts of interviews with the teachers and students, teacher and

student-produced writings and test data. As an observer, I could not help but notice the work of teachers in the project. Although Toby and Kevin[1] were pleased that their participation in the project provided opportunity and funding to address critical health issues facing their students in a manner that fit comfortably into their philosophy and pedagogical practices for teaching literacy, I watched them become discouraged by what they were learning about life-threatening risks to their students' lives. I watched them become frustrated with the challenges of making instructional decisions and finding instructional materials required to realize the community-specific, inquiry-based curriculum they were creating in dialogue with their students. I watched their excitement when they exchanged individual practices, beliefs, and teacher-research with their WFYL colleagues.

In addition to working as a participant-observer in the WFYL project, I also was a co-director of the Project. While I participated in curriculum development and periodic classroom activities and observed students and their teachers at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit, I also facilitated project work in sites located in Michigan, Virginia, and Wisconsin in 1993-94; in those sites and in Georgia and Texas in 1994-95; in those five sites and in Maryland, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota since 1995. In order to carry out that work, Project Co-director David Schaafsma and I

arranged for semi-annual, day-long workshops each fall and spring at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention and Spring Conference.

Because I had other responsibilities in MSU that made regular site visits to places other than Michigan difficult, in September of 1994, I invited participants in the WFYL project—K-12 teachers, like my colleagues Toby Curry and Kevin La Plante, and university faculty like me—to engage in an electronic mail (e-mail) listserv (wfyltchr@msu.edu) conversation.[2] Because many teachers did not know one another particularly well when they joined the WFYL Project, and because they taught at different grade levels in a variety of communities, I imagined the listserv would function primarily as a public electronic bulletin board on which we would post and respond to

1. WFYL project-related business, such as meeting arrangements and agendas and funding matters,
2. Summaries of the WFYL work in project classrooms, and
3. Teaching methods and materials participants were finding useful and effective.

I also imagined the listserv would help David Schaafsma and me stay informed about work at various project sites and help us see how we might be able to support that work.

Toby, Kevin, and I frequently discussed the demands that commitment to such a curriculum placed on the teachers in the project. Some project teachers had never heard of creating curricula in dialogue with students; they had no

experience with positioning students as inquirers and helping them to identify and then research issues of deep concern to them. Others had been developing such curricula for years. Some teachers were well integrated into the broader communities in which they teach. For them, the civic literacy and service learning components of the project were natural; others had never attempted those extensions of their classroom practice. Some had familiarity with some of the health-related topics their students named. However, none were fully familiar with the literature and research related to all of the subjects their students named. These varying levels of experience, understanding, and knowledge among project teachers led all of us to use the project's listserv to ask one another, in one way or another: What are you doing? How are you doing it? What are you reading? What are you asking students to read, write and do?

Project teachers were curious about how colleagues were managing to integrate the WFYL curriculum into existing curricula; how they were representing the project to others—including administrators; how they were supporting student searches for resources that would teach them more about their topics of inquiry; how they located resources to support their own understandings; how they encouraged students to "own" the curriculum and to provide leadership for their peers; how they publicized their students' work in developing grant proposals, community

service projects, and anthologies; and—particularly—how they dealt with some of the stickier issues that students raised when they were invited to name and research issues that concerned and troubled them.

Eric, a student in Kevin's class, personified a kind of situation that teachers faced and later wanted to discuss on-line when he cried as he read a story about the death five years before of his best friend, his dog, Bark. Through his tears, he admonished his peers, "We have to be really careful about people's feelings. . . . Sometimes we don't realize how painful things are until we write them down and then say them aloud" (Field Notes, 10/16/95).

And, if WFYL teachers were only dealing with the very real pain that a young person feels from the death of a dog, they might not have needed each other so much. However, the problems that their students were naming ran much deeper than the death of beloved pets. On the same day that Eric cried about the death of his dog, I listened from a distance and discretely took field notes in my journal as Shaquida[3] explained the focus of her writing to Kevin: Shaquida, whose sister was a member of the Crips, was being forced to make a decision about gang membership. An outsider, nonplussed, I listened to Kevin help outline the advantages (few) and disadvantages (many) of gang membership.

Despite his apparent calm, Kevin was as shaken by his conference with Shaquida as I was. After class, he

explained to me the neighborhood caste system: how Shaquida had provoked gang problems by bringing class friends who lived in the projects into her neighborhood, upsetting local gang members by violating their turf. Kevin explained, "Saving face is life or death—they [my students] often don't have much else. If she looks like a wimp, kids will pick on her even more. Things have changed. Now killing can be justified by normally good kids" (Field Notes, 10/16/95).

Perhaps my next visit illustrated some of the inherent stress that WFYL teachers encountered regularly—stress that likely inspired WFYL teachers' strong commitment to collaboration with one another. Kevin's students began the class by listing on the chalkboard in their own words the topics that emerged in their eighth-grade stories: gangbangers, violence, fights and riots; girls who sleep around, AIDS and teen pregnancy; pimping and prostitution; older children who suck their thumbs; daddies who abandon their children; teachers who molest kids; peer pressure; living on welfare; siblings who wet the bed; bad attitudes; suicide; lonely people; lack of values or morals; homosexuality; racism; drinking and drugs; and hanging around with the wrong crowd. After they named the issues that emerged in these initial pieces of writing, Kevin invited the students to develop folktales. In their folktales, students were to merge truth and fiction in order to make the people and themes of their stories

"larger than life." In the process they were to tell "universal truths."

Eric and Shaquida were among the first students to volunteer to read their drafts. Their stories shared the same "universal truth": The innocent are often killed at very young ages simply because they find themselves in the presence of illegal activities. Several additional stories confirmed this "universal truth" in Kevin's students' lives. That day, my field notes remind me, the toll on Kevin was clearly visible. He seemed on the verge of being swept under by anger and frustration at the injustices that permeated his students' lives; he became brusque with his students and changed the focus of the conversation. When the student who read last that day raised the issue of teen suicide, Kevin responded, "It would be wrong of me to try to talk about this in less than a minute [before the bell rings]. But if this issue is troubling you . . . talk to me after class or write about it in your journal. Talk to me or someone you trust. No problem is worth your life. Trust me" (Field Notes, 10/23/95). The bell rang, the students left, I left to go to Toby's class, and Kevin, left alone, waited for the next group of students.

In Toby's class, I wrote in my field notes,

> I can't get my mind off Kevin's class. I can't believe I walked away without talking to Kevin. His eyes were so hurt by what the kids were saying. There were several times I think he purposefully asked the students questions anticipating that their answers would make him angry ("Is it ever right for a man to hit a woman?") because anger is easier to deal with

> than pain. Sometimes he seemed to interrupt the flow of painful discussions with questions that redirected the focus . . .Could I deal with this more than once a week? (Field Notes, 10/23/95)

The reality of teacher isolation, the often-troubled nature of the adolescents' lives, the complexity of responding to the external demands of administrators and educational reformers, and the internal demands of students whose needs are at once basic and critical were never more evident to me. My colleagues and I believed we were doing important work in the WFYL Project when we invited students to identify the risks to their health and well-being and then focus their research into those issues, but at what cost to teachers? In addition to their other, multiple responsibilities, how were teachers to respond to the knowledge of the very real health risks their students named? How were they to handle the emotional burden knowledge of those risks entailed and continue to invest their energy and concentration in further developing their students' abilities in the language arts?

How do teachers—caring, professional adults—knowing that their students are living in life-threatening conditions—avoid debilitating feelings such as pity, anger, and hopelessness and convert their concern into purposeful teaching, teaching with some promise of helping students to help themselves in those conditions? How do they teach prescribed curricula aimed at making students' successful test takers? How do they negotiate the demands

of school districts and states and the needs of the children, particularly when those demands and needs seem to be in conflict with one another?

As it happened, when I was conducting ethnographic research at the Dewey Center and managing the WFYL listserv conversation, I was also managing two other listservs established to serve teacher researchers: (1) RCWPMSU@ MSU.EDU, established for the Red Cedar Writing Project, Michigan State University's chapter of the National Writing Project and (2) NWPPON@MSU.EDU, established for Project Outreach, an initiative of the National Writing Project supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Fund. Differences among the three were easy to see. Even the casual observer could note that the number of postings on the lists varied dramatically. Although a substantial description of the quantitative and qualitative differences among these listserv conversations is the topic of another essay for another time, I offer the following charted portrait of participation during a two-year time period on each of the listservs to suggest one reason why I wanted to re-search, to look again carefully at the WFYL listserv and what was going on there:

Figure 1: Comparison of Three Teacher Researcher Listservs

	NWPPON	RCWPMSU	WFYLTCHR
My role, listserv manager &	National Coordinator/ Site Director	NWP Site Director	Co-Director/ University Participant
Total # of Participants:	23	26 - 54	15 - 25
# project directors	5	3	2
# K-12 teacher participants	18	46	8 to 15
# university participants	5	9	7 to 10
# others	2	1	1
Total listserv entries 4/96-3/98 (2 year period)	623	879	1396
Total full or partial lines of text	7324	8636	20,896
Number of direct questions	568	632	918
# entries by project directors	300	348	529
% Entries by project co-directors	49%	40%	38%
# entries by K-12 teachers	314	483	548
% Entries by K-12 teachers	51%	55%	40%
# entries by university participants	0	31	293
% Entries by university participants	0	4%	21%
# entries by others	4	10	7
% Entries by others	0.50%	1%	0.50%
Project geographic locations	15 states	primarily MI	10 states
Face-to-face interactions during 2-year period	17 days	20-day workshops (but 5 groups)	4 days for entire group

Partially because I served in a leadership capacity in each of the three projects and had a vested interest in the projects' providing teachers opportunities for critical reflection on their practice, I found myself asking why teachers on the WFYL listserv were talking more (i.e., numbers of entries; length of individual entries) than teachers on the other two projects listservs I was managing. Why were they asking more questions of one

another? Why were they sustaining conversational themes over more entries? Why were they citing outside references for one another more often? Why were they addressing one another by name when they knew full well that they were directing their messages to the entire group?

In a preliminary analysis, as I looked again more carefully at the WFYL listserv conversation, I observed teachers conducting inquiries with one another, inquiries of at least six distinctive kinds: (1) **pedagogical** (e.g. How do we teach in WFYL classrooms? What do we and our students do? What methods work well with students? How do we improve what we do?), (2) **philosophical and theoretical** (e.g. Whose theories inform our practice and beliefs? What do we believe about teaching, learning, schools and students? What are our basic assumptions?), (3) **curricular** (e.g. What issues are germane to the academic focus of this student/class/curriculum? What are appropriate and useful resources for WFYL student inquiries?), (4) **socio-cultural** (e.g. What difference does where I'm teaching make on my teaching? Who are my students? How do they influence my teaching?), (5) **personal** (e.g. What is my place in the WFYL community? What do I have to offer WFYL teachers? What do I have to gain from them?), and (6) **reflective** (e.g. What am I thinking? What am I wondering? What were the "re-markable" features of my day?). The conversations also included inquiries not directly related to classrooms and teaching but focused on **network maintenance** (How do we stay

connected to one another? How do we develop our personal and professional relationships?).

Intrigued by the richness of this preliminary analysis of the WFYL listserv conversations, once again, I asked myself "Why?" Why were there more and more complex teacher conversations taking shape on the WFYL listserv than on other listserv conversations of which I was a part?

Simple answers—such as closer personal relationships among teachers on the WFYL listserv or more time in face-to-face interactions didn't work. They weren't accurate. Several of the participants on the WFYL listserv were also on other listservs and their contributions on the WFYL listserv were distinctively different from those they posted on other lists. In fact, teachers on the WFYL list actually had spent less time in face-to-face interactions with one another than teachers on the other lists did.

One thing was certain. I wanted to know the answers to the questions I was shaping about the WFYL listserv conversations. With these questions in mind, I redirected the focus of my research from WFYL students to their teachers, and I reshaped my research methodology. To begin my new research project, I became a close reader and researcher of two bodies of literature: one about the development of "healthy" teacher networks (See, for example, Lieberman and McLaughlin, 1996; Lieberman, 1996; Richardson, 1996; Fine, 1991; and Smith and Wigginton, 1991); the second about teachers' professional development

(See, for example, Hargraves and Fullan, 1992; Lieberman and Miller, 1992; Little, 1987 and 1995; Lewis, 1997; Darling Hammond, 1998). Theorizing the theorists, the scholars who looked across teacher networks and professional development activities in order to account for their characteristics, I developed a super-ordinate set of characteristics of healthy teacher networks and authentic professional development activities. Equipped with these sets of characteristics, I returned to the WFYL listserv conversations to determine four things: (1) Was there evidence that WFYL teachers had formed what might be called a "healthy" teacher network, according to the characteristics of such networks that I had gleaned from the literature? (2) Were WFYL teachers engaged in what might be called authentic professional development, according to the characteristics of authentic professional development that I had gleaned from the literature? (3) Were there any characteristics of the WFYL listserv conversations that were noteworthy because teachers were conducting them on-line? and (4) Based upon my analyses, are there any insights I might share with my professional colleagues (K-12 teachers and teacher educators) that would have a beneficial effect on the preparation of teachers in the current era in which the practice of education is reforming itself?

More specifically put, I wanted to learn the answers to questions like these:

1. How does our field, particularly the corner of the field in which English educators work, characterize authentic or generative professional development opportunities for teachers, opportunities that prompt change in teacher understanding and practice that leads to improved learning opportunities for students? What evidence is there, if any, that participation in WFYL—specifically in the project listserv conversations—offered teachers those opportunities? How might examining and extrapolating from already identified characteristics of "authentic" professional development and project opportunities offer us generative insights and questions into our practice as English educators?

2. What are the unique features of a "virtual" site for teachers' professional development? In what ways does an electronic mail conversation as the site of professional development offer opportunities and constraints that differ from face-to-face professional development opportunities? How might examining and extrapolating from those inherent characteristics inform our work as English educators?

Although I could have examined the WFYL listserv conversations along the lines that conversational analysts do (See, for example, Goffman, 1981; Robinson & Stock, 1990) or along the lines that analysts of electronic texts are beginning to do (See, for example, Sandholtz, Ringstaff and Dwyer, 1995 and 1997; West, 1996; Jody and Saccardi, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Hawisher and Selfe,1991; Gundlach, 1983), my concerns and interests led me to analyze the WFYL listserv conversations thematically with reference to the superordinate lists of characteristics of healthy teacher networks, I present this analysis in Chapter Three, and the characteristics of authentic professional development, I

present this analysis in Chapter Four, that I developed from the literature in each of those areas.

Informed by these analyses, I worked once again as a theorist, speculating on those characteristics of the WFYL listserv conversations that I believed were the result of their being conducted on-line. Finally, in Chapter Five, reflecting on my own research, I make claims and argue for them: When teachers conduct their own professional development, in communities of like-minded, similarly-engaged colleagues, they address, uniquely perhaps, one of the challenges inherent in *all* of the reform agendas identified in Chapter One: the continuing education and development of teachers. In Chapter Five, I claim that "virtual," electronic sites like the one in which the WFYL teachers network create occasions for teachers' individual and communal professional development. They offer opportunities and constraints that not only distinguish these sites from places where professionals meet face-to-face, but that also distinguish the nature of the professional development experiences that take place in them from those that take place in face-to-face interactions. I also argue that the dialogues conducted in such sites can meaningfully inform not only the practice of teaching but also the educational reform agenda.

As I do these things, I hope that I am also contributing to the call for additional research and better understanding into teachers' potential uses of technology

for their continuing professional development that Peter West makes in his article "A Virtual Network":

> In its report "Teachers and Technology: Making the Connection," the OTA [Office of Technological Assistance] featured several programs nationwide taking advantage of technology to help teachers both at the pre- and in-service levels. But the report also noted that professional development by means of technology is still a field in its infancy. . . . "We said it was a recommended area for development and research," Fulton [former OTA researcher] explains. . . . Research is still scanty on just what makes for effective use of electronic media in professional development. (1996, pp. 38-39)

Notes

[1]Participants' full names are listed in Appendix A. Throughout the text I use first names not only to keep such references as short (and readable) as possible, but also to reflect the social as well as professional nature of our relationships.

[2]An e-mail listserv is created by developing an eight-character or less name for the project, filing an application with an on-line service provider, entering the names and individual e-mail addresses of project participants on a list, and sending that list to the on-line service provider. All messages that are sent by any list member to the project's e-mail address are distributed automatically to all of the individuals on the list. Messages can only be read and sent by those whose names appear on the list—providing a clearly defined audience for the writers.

I currently manage several lists housed at Michigan State University for three teacher networks; wfyltchr@msu.edu and wfylclas@msu.edu for the Write for Your Life Project; rcwpmsu@msu.edu for the Red Cedar Writing Project; and nwppon@msu.edu, nwpoutre@msu.edu, ponllt@msu.edu, nltnwp@msu.edu, and podirect@msu.edu for the National Writing Project's Project Outreach.

[3]This names is a pseudonym.

CHAPTER THREE

The WFYL Listserv: A "Healthy" Teacher Network Culture

As I studied the WFYL listserv conversation to understand better the ways in which we were teaching and learning from one another, I became convinced that the reasons the professional development opportunities I will describe in the next chapter "took root and flourished" on the WFYL listserv were these: because WFYL teachers were committed to the work of the project, because we trusted one another, and because our sense of ownership led each of us to step forward from time to time to assume leadership positions within the network. The culture we created collaboratively influenced how and what we learned from one another as surely as the invitations to learning that were offered one another created our network. These insights led me to realize that before I could characterize the professional development opportunities that WFYL teachers offered one another on our listserv, I needed to account for our network culture, for how it became a "hothouse" for the generation of professional development opportunities. As I studied our listserv conversations, it was not difficult to see that the WFYL network culture and the professional development

opportunities that took shape within it were reciprocally constituted.

What is a teacher network? Generally, teacher networks are defined as professional communities of educators unified around common concerns that are pedagogical, disciplinary, or reform-oriented in nature, although, upon occasion, networks may address more than one of these. Some fairly well known teacher networks include the National Writing Project (pedagogical), the History Teaching Alliance (disciplinary), and the Diversity and Excellence Working for the Education of Youth--DEWEY (reform-oriented). No one knows exactly how many teacher networks exist nationwide, although some estimate the number to be a few hundred and growing:

> In the past decade, the popularity of these teacher-to-teacher networks has steadily grown—a testament to the demand for professional development that grows out of the teacher's own interests and experiences. Networks banish the one-size-fits-all approach to teacher learning and replace it with a rich mix of offerings run by teachers, for teachers. (Richardson, 1996, p. 27)

Several of the most widely recognized and acclaimed national networks reflect how size varies across networks. The NWP, for instance, has 160,000 members; Foxfire has 4000; and Bread Loaf, 500.

With evidence of demand for more teacher networks, we might well ask: Are teacher networks sites *for* teachers' professional development or sources *of* teachers' professional development or *both*? That is, by joining a network, will teachers encounter *the opportunity for* professional development or will joining a network provide *the experience of* professional development? The distinction is telling, and perhaps, critically important if those in the network are to accomplish their objectives.

Scholars who write about teacher networks refer to them as both sources and sites of teacher development. Citing others, Lieberman and McLaughlin (1996), for instance, suggest they may be a potential *site* for teacher professional development:

> Teachers choose to become active in collegial networks because they afford occasion for professional development and collegiality and reward participants with a renewed sense of purpose and efficacy. Networks offer a way for teachers to experience growth in their careers through deepened and expanded classroom expertise and new leadership roles. (Bascia, 1991; Carter, 1991; Fine, 1991; Lord, 1991; Smith & Wigginton, 1991, p. 63)

They also suggest that networks provide a *source* for professional development:

> Those who participate in networks return to their schools with new ideas and practices and a willingness to experiment. They also display leadership by teaching

> other teachers or by becoming active in local, state or national education reform efforts. (p. 66)

Similarly, Lieberman and Grolnick (in Lewis, 1997) state that network membership is a source of teacher development: "Teachers find courage as well as knowledge through participation in networks" (p.2).

Such positive accounts of professional development as a result of participating in networks are not unusual. Some researchers credit networks not only with generating significant professional development among teachers, but also with sustaining it: "A network sustains what grows out of other professional development experiences" (Helen Purks in Richardson, p. 35). In such accounts, networks would seem to be the site as well as the source for teachers' professional development.

Not everyone thinks of networks as the unfailing source of such outcomes, however. Miles, for instance, notes that the transference of something of "socially relevant" value across a network is *implied* rather than assumed, an important distinction:

> At the most abstract, a network is simply a set of nodes or points connected by lines or links. There is often the *implication* [emphasis mine] that various things (such as messages, objects, energy, etc.) travel along the lines, which thus serve as channels. . . . In social networks the nodes are persons, groups or organizations. The things which travel between the nodes

> are *socially* relevant. . . objects, labor, affect, evaluation, knowledge, prescription/opinion, influence, power. So a network is a connected set of social actors exchanging socially relevant material. (1977, p. 2)

Others, such as Smith, emphasize that a network is simply an organizational structure with connotations of distance that influence contact:

> A network is an interrelated set of members separated in space so that direct face-to-face interactions tend to be sporadic or episodic rather than regular or frequent. (1977, p. 4)

Schon, however, distinguishes networks from organizations: ". . . they are not governed by formal rules. They lie outside the boundaries of formal contact, formal regulation, formal organization" (1977, p. 3).

Peterson suggests that the definition of networks may be changing:

> To understand the significance and implications of social networks, one must appreciate how closely this concept in contemporary writing approximates the social group, as understood by Dewey, Bentley, Mean and the progressive/pluralist tradition more generally. (1977, p. 4)

Huberman (1982) also emphasizes the importance of "space" between members in his conception of networks, but suggests further that all network members are also "homophiles," people who share a common background, common experiences and common understandings and conviction (p. 91).

I would argue that as definitions like those that Miles, Smith, Peterson and Huberman suggest a network is *NOT inherently a source* of teachers' professional development but *is potentially a site* of teachers' professional development. The network itself is simply a configuration of channels that socially connects individuals—in this case teachers—who share common understandings and convictions. Within it, on a sporadic or episodic basis, these individuals may exchange "objects, labor, affect, evaluation, knowledge, prescription/opinion, influence, [or] power." In the case of teacher networks, in order for authentic professional development to occur, the exchange must be realized rather than implied. What variables influence whether a meaningful exchange between participants occurs?

Although teacher networks seem to be sites where generative opportunities for teachers' professional development may occur, literature in this area suggests that not all networks generate the same opportunities. The possibility of better understanding the variables that influence how and to what extent professional development opportunities are created and taken up by teachers in these venues may be seen by examining a particular network for

evidence of the extent to which network members do the following things:

1. Make regular and strong commitments to the network's purposes,

2. Make regular and strong commitments to the value of networking, collaboration, and collegiality,

3. Develop a system of interpersonal relationships that establish feelings of safety, engagement, and stimulation

4. Develop styles of leadership that group members find effective,

5. Respond to external pressures in ways that serve to further establish the bonds between group members.

It is just such an examination of the WFYL teacher network that I take up in this chapter.

Such an inquiry is not without its challenges and opportunities. Susan Florio-Ruane and Julie de Tar (1995) suggest one:

> Recently our colleague, Christopher Clark, brought to our attention an essay on humus published in the gardening section of the *New York Times* (Logan, 1994). Humus is a messy medium essential for plant growth. As such, it is of great interest to botanists and gardeners alike. But according to the author, humus infuriates botanists who are accustomed to counting and describing elements in soil because, since its contents vary from site to site, fixing the mechanism by which it fosters plant growth is exceedingly difficult. One cannot understand how humus serves growth simply by describing and counting its molecular components because, in the author's words, "it is very possible that no two humus molecules are or have ever been alike" (Florio-Ruane & de Tar, 1995, p. 36).

The culture of "healthy" teacher networks are apt to be similar to humus—generative venues in which teachers and their practice flourish, each one with a slightly unique character. However, as anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff reminds us, "cultures are, after all, assemblages, authenticated by belief and agreement, focused only in crisis, systemized only after the fact" (1974, p. 10). The study of anthropology suggests there is much to be gained by attempting to study the characteristics of groups that are each unique in order to compare and contrast them generatively with one another.

To develop a full appreciation for the way in which the listserv conversation served to influence the professional development of participants in the WFYL teacher network, it is important to examine the "molecular components" of the culture, the humus in which the seeds of development were planted: the messages posted and responded to on the project's listserv's. The list's log reports also offer us the opportunity, as Myerhoff suggests they might, to systematize the culture after the fact in order to learn more from it--to understand more fully the synergistic relationship between WFYL listserv conversation, WFYL as a

"healthy" network, and WFYL as a site of teacher professional development.

What do those of us in English education stand to gain from examining the characteristics of healthy teacher networks and using those characteristics as a lens through which to examine one English language arts teacher network in greater detail? Perhaps a more fully developed understanding of how such opportunities might be developed for other English educators. And, as Ann Lieberman (1996) suggests:

> . . . there is growing evidence that important and potentially powerful organizational arrangements exist outside the school . . . . These networks, collaboratives, coalitions, and partnerships offer teachers professional opportunities that differ in quality and kind than those that have been available inside the school or in traditional professional development programs.
>
> [They offer opportunities such as] . . . access to new ideas and a supportive community for the very difficult struggle of translating these ideas into meaningful changes in teaching and learning in each school and each classroom. In the process, teachers have helped to build an agenda [in the network] that is sensitive to their contexts and concerns, have had opportunities to be leaders as well as learners and have often committed themselves to goals that are broader and more inclusive than their initial concerns. (p. 194)

If English language arts teachers are indeed to make substantive "meaningful changes in teaching and learning" in their classrooms, they may well need access to "a supportive community for [this] very difficult struggle."

The WFYL Network

The Write for Your Life Project functioned as a teacher network by connecting English educators in two ways: at most project sites, classroom teachers networked with university faculty face-to-face in classroom settings on a regular basis and across sites both classroom teachers and university faculty networked in semi-annual meetings and through their participation on the project listserv. Joe Check (1997), a colleague at one of the host universities of the project, has observed:

> Many teachers would argue that both small working groups and larger networks are essential aspects of practitioner inquiry. Small groups give practitioner inquiry face-to-face support and an immediate audience for their developing understandings, insuring that their findings travel beyond the walls of their own classroom. Networks give them access to a wider community of co-inquirers with similar problems and successes, and allow sharing of methodologies and conclusions on a scale that over time, can raise everyone's work to a higher level. (p. 7)

In their responses to a survey in which participants were invited to reflect on the place of the listserv conversation in their lives and professional development, WFYL high school English teacher Diane Doherty (1998)[1] from Coatesville, Pennsylvania noted of the broader conversation:

> The best and most important influence for me . . . is the realization that others face the same (or similar) difficulties, frustrations, self doubts that we [with her WFYL colleague Andy Huber] do. It makes me feel part of a community.

Of the small working group, Jennifer Tendero (1998), a middle school English teacher from New York City noted: "I also have the benefit of almost daily talks with one or both of the university contacts here in NYC."

The task teachers' undertook—to co-construct through dialogue with their students and one another, locally-relevant health and literacy curricula designed to shape healthier environments for students, to improve students' literacy practices, and to make school a meaningful place for their study—implied different levels of change in classroom practices in various sites. We might infer, however, that all change induces a sense of vulnerability and risk-taking on the part of those who will decide whether to initiate and sustain new practices or not. Research suggests that particularly in urban classrooms, where teachers confront the problems of poverty, violence, and racism, change can be challenging. In these settings, teacher networks have helped support teachers' sense of professionalism and investment in changing their practice.

The WFYL Project functioned as a "healthy" network for English teachers to the extent that participants in the

project shared common goals and purposes and contributed to and benefited from memberships in the network. In the discussion that follows, I will demonstrate the extent to which the WFYL listserv conversations provided evidence of a "healthy" network.

I have organized my discussion in terms of the five characteristics that I claim define "healthy" professional development networks for teachers. I begin each discussion with quotations from works that WFYL teachers cited for one another in their listserv conversations. I continue by reflecting on postings that WFYL teachers made to the listserv that I believe illustrate the characteristic of healthy networks that I am discussing at the time. In conclusion, I discuss reflections that teachers wrote and shared with me apart from the listserv. I interweave these three kinds of texts that represent our reading, our writing and our thinking in order to suggest for the reader the inter-textual, heteroglossic nature of our internal and external dialogues.

1. Teachers in a Healthy Network Make Regular and Strong Commitments to the Network's Purposes

> In the 1990s, the state of adolescent health in America reached crisis proportions: large numbers of ten- to fifteen-year-olds suffer from depression that may lead to suicide; they jeopardize their future by

> abusing illegal drugs and alcohol, and by smoking; they engage in premature, unprotected sexual activity; they are victims or perpetrators of violence; they lack proper nutrition and exercise. Their glaring need for health care is largely ignored. (Hechinger, 1992, p. 21)
>
> Despite the public outcry that we are not teaching the basics, the irony is that we are over focusing on discrete skills and superficial learning at the expense of not teaching our students how to interpret, evaluate, analyze, and apply knowledge for Information Age learning. As demands for literacy in our society continue to increase, we will need more students who can read, analyze, and use complex texts, including those available on computers and electronic media. (Routman, 1996, p. 6)
>
> A young Athabaskan Indian boy once looked at his teacher and asked, "When are we going to die?" The teacher to whom he addressed the question was surprised, but answered, "Well, none of us know when we are going to die, that is for a power beyond us to decide." The young boy looked away and said softly, "Well, if we don't know when we are going to die, then why do we have to go to school? Why can't we just be happy?" That Native Alaskan teacher later said to me with tears in her eyes, "Why can't we figure out ways to make that child happy in school?" (Delpit, 1995, p. 104)

At the outset we named three WFYL project goals for one another on-line: improving the health and perceptions of well-being of students in project classrooms, improving the quality of WFYL students' literacy, and making schools sites where students took up personally demanding, yet satisfying, inquiries and study. If WFYL were to be recognized as a healthy teacher network as illustrated in participants' conversation on the listserv, we could expect to see evidence

that teachers were regularly validating for one another all three project purposes.

Healthier Lives, Choices, and Communities

From the beginning of the project, teachers' postings about health-related research topics that emerged from their students' writing and discussions linked participants to one another and reaffirmed the potential value to their students of their involvement in the project. The following postings sample those issues of adolescent health and well-being that were emerging from their students' "lived lives."

I begin with lists of topics that teachers reported students wished to learn more about:

During 1993-94, Sharon Floyd (10/28/93), a high school English teacher from Saginaw, Michigan, wrote[2]:

> Our discussion centered on things that students have experienced that make them fearful. So far we have identified the issues of discrimination, violence, physical illness, death and drug and alcohol abuse with appropriate anecdotes sprinkled throughout.

During 1994-95, I (1/18/95) wrote about the classrooms of high school English teachers Terri Martin from Flint, Michigan, and Bonnie Stone from Montrose, Michigan:

> Yesterday I met with Terri's Flint Central class and Bonnie's Montrose class. We are planning a trip for these two classes to the Writing Center on Friday, January 27th. Both have completed first drafts of grant proposals to workshop (Two from Terri's class—[the

first] for a magazine for middle school students that addresses issues of Teen Sexuality and [the second] for a one-act play that deals with substance abuse and domestic violence; and five from Bonnie's class—[two] for pamphlets that deal with Teen Sexuality and another on Substance Abuse for a survey and report on issues surrounding [episodes of] violence in high school sports, for a find-your-own adventure book on peer pressure and relationships, and for a short video encouraging teens to become active recyclers.

During 1995-96, Debbie Kinder (12/7/95), a high school English teacher from Platteville, Wisconsin, wrote:

> Kari's mom killed herself when Kari was five, Kara's dad died of a mysterious fungus infection last May, Ericka's mom is "nuts" (multiple personalities), five students wrote about grandparents' death or illnesses, two wrote about heart disease, two wrote about diabetes, two about AIDS, two about alcoholism, four about various types of cancer, two about smoking, two about being healthy, and one each about aging, bad knees, modern medicine drawbacks, teen pregnancy and going bald.

During 1996-97, I (Swenson, 10/17/96) wrote again describing the themes from the student essays in middle school English teacher Kevin La Plante's class:

> Here's the "theme list" that emerged from our reading of Kevin's 8th graders' neighborhood pieces [Describe your neighborhood]: Dangerous celebrations, dressing to fit in, police harassment, driving illegally, benefits of multi-generational neighborhoods, water safety, alcoholism, shoplifting, fear of hospitals, death of friends/family members, gangs, living in "close" spaces with many people and few green spaces, drug use, prostitution, dog fights, guns, stereotyping neighborhoods, vacations as retreats, house fires, rats, trash, acting hard/tough/fighting, drive bys, handling rage, benefits of sports.

During 1997-98, Beth Steffen (9/15/97), a high school English teacher in Beloit, Wisconsin, shared the issues emerging in her students' papers.

> . . . [in their first set of papers students were writing about] being arrested and sent to the psych ward, abortion, father's drug problem, getting wasted, sports, alcohol poisoning, two shooting incidents in neighborhood, family vacations, father imprisoned for raping sister and making attempt on author—other class: gang member whose girlfriend is pregnant, boy in and out of jail, two of top grads in class, students who struggle with depression and obsessive/compulsive disorder . . . writing about Beloit and Beloit issues/people.

But lists don't speak so tellingly as stories do. Stories that teachers told were frequent and often reflected the issues Hechinger (1992) cited in his report for the Carnegie Corporation that introduced this section. Students wrote and teachers shared tales of anorexic students, pregnant ones, and drug-addicted ones; tales of shootings in WFYL schools; tales of students making choices regarding gang membership and confronting abusive parents; tales of students failing classes, smoking, drinking and engaging in violent acts. Others' stories were not about high-stakes dramas with life threatening consequences. They were about the pain of growing up, of suffering loss, and of learning how to appropriately respond to the losses of others. Some stories raised issues about student trust and confidentiality and

about the roles that teachers can and often do play in the lives of their students—of the commensurate levels of concern and fulfillment that teaching produces. In that vein, Omelia Donahoo (Donahoo, 3/20/96), a middle school English teacher from Savannah, Georgia, shared the following story on the listserv:

> Speaking of tears, we had tears in both WFYL classes later in the day. That prompt ("If I could relive one day in my life, which one would it be and why?) really reached some kids. During fifth period, I had to time two boys out because of their insensitive reactions to two girls' readings (one remembers a pet rabbit she felt she could have saved and another remembering afternoons spent with her aunt who has died). One of the boys wouldn't stop bothering Monisa as he was leaving the room, so I told him to close his mouth. He returned the advice to me, and I wrote a referral on him. That was only the second referral I have written this year, and I wasn't happy about it. On the way to lunch, I asked a couple of guys from the class if I had overreacted. They both smiled, and Nathaniel said, no, they (meaning Aaron and Shane) did that kind of thing all day long. Shane got three days of in-school suspension for harassment. I don't know if it will help, but I plan to send him some writing assignments that I hope will make him think about the situation. I don't know . . . .
>
> In seventh period, one girl asked me to read her story aloud. It was about her cousin who was recently killed while getting off a CAT bus on Quacco Road. He was coming home from ROTC practice, and a speeding driver hit him. I had about eight students in that class that did not want to share their writing but wanted me to be sure to read what they wrote. They would not let their books be taken up; they had to be put in my hands. I read one after school. One of my best students told about a time he had shoplifted baseball cards and had been caught (before he found Jesus). He was not reported, and he said he trusts his

parents but he could never tell them this. When he handed me his book, he said he appreciated me giving him a chance to get something off his conscience. WHEW! I decided to quit reading then, and I brought them home. I'm about to go out on the porch and read everything from yesterday . . .

Finally, there was an article in today's Accent section: "As Middle Class Split, U.S. Loses Its Balance." This is a very powerful article and fit in with [American students' lives] not being Donna Reed stuff, but it is a very difficult text for seventh graders. Could you guys read this and give me some ideas?

To which her university collaborator, Pat Fox (Fox, 3/20/96) from Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia, replied:

I did see that article on the vanishing middle class but only skimmed it. I'll look again.

The boy who was grateful for the opportunity to get something off his conscience is a perfect example of what I mean by how touching it is in a world in which children, in particular, are so vulnerable that they take our writing prompts seriously and to heart as invitations to open and explore what is not always easy to look at or think about in their lives. Can you imagine the level of trust that says that he put in you? Can you imagine having that degree of trust yourself in a teacher who is reading your writing? Pretty mind boggling, doncha think?

Other teachers confirmed the network's commitment to improving students' health and well-being in postings like this one from Beth (Steffen, 10/22/96), who noted how the issues New York City WFYL students named and published in video format motivated her own students in Wisconsin:

Tony/Margo . . . just wanted to say that "Tales from the Hood" [a video on the issue-oriented writing

> from that site] evoked incredible response from my 10th graders, who, in 8 days created their own videos.

Laura Schneider Vander Ploeg (10/31/96), a high school English teacher from Janesville, Wisconsin, responded to the acclaim on the listserv for her students' work by explaining:

> I think what inspired them most were stories of what WFYL kids had done in the past, as well as the idea of being listened to. I don't know—it doesn't sound like much, but I think what motivates them the most is the sense of possibility they get from what other kids have done/are doing.

As our concern for our students' health and well-being moved us to talk to one another, to sympathize with one another, to offer suggestions to one another, to nudge one another, we WFYL teachers exhibited one of the characteristics of a "healthy" network: making regular, strong commitments to a goal we share for the project.

WFYL and Student Literacy Development

Another common goal that WFYL teachers shared--their intention to help students further develop their literacy skills by treating students' real and immediate concerns as the focus of their language arts study--is also everywhere present in WFYL listserv conversations.

In the first year on the listserv, Linda Bush Rebney (Rebney, 11/22/94), a high school English teacher in Saginaw, Michigan, wrote:

> Janet, do I understand you to say that in your conversations with Nancy and Dixie, there is a renewed emphasis on the publication angle? The reason I ask is because I was hearing in South Haven that the primary function of WFYL was to be social action with the publication of student writing okay, but not really what we want. I'm not wording this very well. I was hearing in SH that publishing was nice, but we really want to see some project. Now I'm hearing we should keep up that drive for publication along with possible projects? Help me if I sound confused . . . .

To which I (Swenson, 11/23/94) replied the next day:

> I think the answer is "both." Social action without a strong writing component is not a focus of the project—but using a social action project to develop student literacy skills definitely is. Like you, I feel the wording is awkward, so let me try again. Most of us agree that writing for the sake of writing doesn't appeal to large groups of students, but writing for self-defined purposes does. So, if the students can find a focus—perhaps a social action project that confronts what they feel is an intimate concern—the writing will improve because of the writers engagement. Is that any clearer?

But I may have misrepresented by oversimplifying the relationship between student commitment and investment and improved student writing. Additional voices across the years kept our discussion focused on how we might influence the quality of student literacy.

In September, 1997, Beth (Steffen, 9/9/97) wrote to Diane, "Having your students as readers will help my students care about the quality and content of their work."

And Audrey Appelsies (1/5/98), an elementary school teacher in Minneapolis, Minnesota, initiated a debate on the role of models as we worked with our students:

> . . . I often wonder how much easier it would be to assign pieces about lemons and such. What would I believe if I taught that way? What would I think kids are able to do or not able to do without my intense guidance?
>
> At the same time, I fret that their writing isn't "good" enough because they are all working on their own things and where are their models? It's so hard to provide enough modeling, especially when they are so active and love to act on their ideas. (In other words they won't listen to me for too long anyway!)
>
> Today I had kids designing and beginning to write a classroom newspaper (they thought it would be good to report on their class meetings), others were writing to their Japanese pen pals, and still others were drafting or polishing various family stories.
>
> I am most alive, engaged, and truthfully, happy when my students are doing these types of activities. I look around and...They are busy, time oriented (give us more time, home much more time do we have?) and asking me and others questions...I think we all have certain underlying beliefs about the kind of work we want to do with kids and what are some powerful ways to engage kids in learning..."

To which, David Schaafsma (1/6/98), project co-director at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City, responded:

> Well, Audrey, that was a nice description of your Big Tent classroom [allusion to a conversation in which we discover we have many different philosophies of education, but the WFYL "Big Tent" is capable of holding them all [see p.], which (I heard it) includes some lingering doubts about whether, in such a passionate, engaged, individual-oriented classroom, that you are doing enough for them. Your concern, like Kevin's, was

> the lack of models, and possibly—implicitly—a concern about whether you are teaching, or they are learning, enough about structure, grammar, etc. through such an approach. One of the things I notice about Jennifer's and Margo's classrooms is that they do a lot of connections between reading and writing, looking for structures, dimensions of the reading they are doing and seeing those explicit connections (or lack of them, so they can be built in) in the writing they are doing. Not that the reading always "leads" the writing; sometimes it goes the other way around, but attention is always paid to structures, grammar, "models" they have already read or could read, in the process.

To which Colleen Fairbanks (1/7/98), a university collaborator at the University of Texas, Austin, replied:

> Well, I've been pretty quiet during this conversation, but I want to speak on behalf of models—I think they are necessary, even crucial to the development of readers and writers. And, while I'm not advocating slavish devotion to imitation (which I think is different than the uses writers may have for models), I would argue that it's difficult to write a newspaper, as Audrey's kids are, if you don't know what a newspaper is or without thinking about what kind of newspaper you want to write.

As we discussed and shared examples of ways to motivate students by varying the audience, purposes, methods of revision, and mini-lessons on writing (which will be peppered throughout this chapter and the next), we taught one another what we called "promising practices" for literacy development. Listserv evidence of our contributions to one another's work and to the improvement of one another's students' literacy figures as yet another way in which the WFYL listserv revealed a healthy teacher network.

WFYL and School as a Meaningful Place for Students

The project's listserv also documents WFYL teachers' commitment to the third network goal—the development of inquiry-based, dialogic curricula based in students' concerns. Not only did teachers speak to this objective, but they also reported their students' perceptions of the meaningfulness of WFYL work.

In the following posting Debbie (11/22/95) reports on her students' reaction to the failure of a project they wished to undertake. Debbie's students wrote a letter to the principal of their school appealing for a change in the school lunch policy. The principal refused to either meet with them or respond to their letter.

> I said when he read their letters [following the initial letter], he [the principal] might feel different, but they knew it was a lost cause. I told them of a colleague—who shall remain nameless—who thought that it was irresponsible of me to encourage students to work on this hopeless project. They assured me that they had had a lot of disappointments greater than this one, and had learned from doing it.
>
> April said that they learned to work together by working on the project. Someone commented that we learned that Ron could write. Max said that he felt more powerful because people were talking about our idea, even though it wasn't accepted. I mentioned that Ron had said in his letter that we would learn something whether or not the letter was accepted, and I asked him what he had in mind. He said that not many English students in our high school could say that they had been working on a real life problem as we had.

Debbie's students taught us all that outcomes weren't always the best gauge for the perceived "success" of the project--sometimes the process was sufficient to help students feel their efforts and experiences had been worthwhile.

In another set of postings, Beth (Steffen, 11/31/96) responded in this way after Laura's fleshing out of the work her students had declared meaningful:

> Thanks for elaborating--I totally agree with you that when kids hear what other [WFYL] kids have done it opens up a world of possibility (and sometimes competition) for what they can do, and maybe do better. That's one thing I love about WFYL--our students can become audiences and inspirations for each other, creating powerful and meaningful and real contexts for writing.

Apart from the listserv, teachers in the WFYL Project also reflected on the network's goals and on how the listserv allowed them to weave dialogic strands that drew them closer together. In written reflections on the usefulness of the listserv conversation, participants reflected on their commitment to students' health and well-being.

Diane noted (Doherty, 1998),

> Last year's conversation on the student listserv about sexism was beneficial to me and to my students, several of whom used the printouts I gave them to find topics for I-Searches.

And Joye Alberts (1998), a university collaborator from Oklahoma State University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, observed:

> Racism [is one conversation theme that stands out in my mind]—last year's discussion was so powerful and underscored how difficult the issues surrounding race and class continue to be for all of us. I keep imagining, though, a world where all the students have the chance to examine their beliefs and their stance. What an investment is being made in these [WFYL] kids' lives. We won't know for sure what the payoff is for years to come.

They also reflected on their commitment to students' literacy development. Toby Kahn Curry (1998), a middle school teacher from the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit, Michigan, noted:

> When teachers become immersed in their students' lives, they really do become "culturally relevant" teachers. Audrey and Beth have impressed me with their drive to understand the "lived lives" of their students.

And Sarah Robbins (1998), a university collaborator from Kennesaw State University in Marietta, Georgia, observed:

> It [the listserv conversation] has been a great example of language shaping community that has informed both my own use of course listservs, directed studies, etc. and my thinking about literacy.

Finally, they commented on their commitment to making schools meaningful places for students. For example, Alan Shinaver (1998), a high school English teacher from Saginaw, Michigan, exhorted us to consider:

I have a need to share; to share what is going on in my classroom and beyond the classroom. . . I feel that I must curb my enthusiasm, employ some element of modesty about our [his and his students'] accomplishments, yet I would love nothing more than to shout, "LOOK, look at what kids can do!" At what KIDS can do, not look at what I have done. I am so excited about what these kids do, and yet I feel like I have to hide that light under a barrel because of the experiences I have had with my own peers . . . I know that wonderful things have happened under my guidance, and GOD I think that they should be shared with the world so that others can be inspired to discover the real potential of kids. Where is it safe to shine? The most comfortable place for me is in my own classroom (The Great Wall) and that is a shame.

2. Teachers in a Healthy Network Make Regular and Strong Commitments to the Value of Networking, Collaboration, and Collegiality.

The implication of these principles [on changing teacher practice] is that the most effective professional development will be classroom based and problem oriented. It should also be conducted in ways that encourage collaboration among colleagues, both within and between institutions. In other words, the emphasis will be on enabling teachers to acquire the competencies and resources to be systematic and intentional learners in and about their own professional situations and the confidence and disposition to use them. . . . (Duckworth, 1987; Connely and Chandinin, 1988)

A written text, it has been argued, functions as a cognitive amplifier (Bruner, 1972) in providing an external and fixed representation of the outcome of intentional mental processes, which can be read, reflected upon, revised and rewritten (Wells, 1992, p. 170).

"So What Did I Learn in School, Anyway?"

I began to make a list of memorable, positive experiences. (If you haven't tried this, by the way, I

> recommend it to you as a sobering—and enlightening—exercise.) I found that then experiences could be grouped fairly easily (with allowances for some inevitable overlap) into broad categories:
>
> *Times when there were visitors to our class from the world outside the class. . . .*
>
> *Times when, as students, we left the classroom on assignments or field trips. . .*
>
> *Times when things we did, as students, had an audience beyond the teacher. . . .*
>
> *Times where we, as students, were given responsibility of an adult nature, and were trusted to fulfill it. . . .*
>
> *Times when we, as students, took on major independent research projects that went far beyond simply copying something out of an encyclopedia, or involved ourselves in periods of intense personal creativity and action* [underline mine]. (Wigginton, 1986, pp. 31-41)

As suggested earlier, WFYL supported multiple layers of networking. In most project sites, classroom teachers formed partnerships with local university faculty, and both K-12 and university faculty were networked across sites through semi-annual meetings and listserv conversations. In addition, WFYL students were networked on their own listserv (wfylclas@msu.edu); through penpal letters, anthology and video exchanges; and through cross visitations.

The teacher listserv became the space in which connections were forged and strengthened in planning and reflecting on our face-to-face meetings, in reflecting on our networking opportunities in individual sites, in analyzing the value of the listserv conversation as a source of

professional growth opportunities, and in distilling and critically reviewing the opportunities our own networking offered WFYL students.

One of the uses we made of the WFYL listserv was to plan semi-annual, face-to-face meetings. We used the listserv to develop collaboratively agendas for our semi-annual meetings, and to de-brief those experiences. For instance, in planning for our spring 1996 meeting, I (Swenson, 2/18/96) invited discussion of the directions we might head that day:

> So . . . What would be most beneficial for our Boston day together? Surely a brief reporting out—here's what I'm currently doing? What else? Looking together at narratives from our classrooms? Looking at [student] grant proposals or [the WFYL student grant] RFPs? Working out a review process [for the student grants]? Writing ourselves? Whattya think?

Tony Tendero (2/19/96), first a middle school English teacher in Falls Church, Virginia, and later a university collaborator in Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, replied:

> Since we are just starting up in the Bronx, I'm guessing the reporting out, the narratives and seeing what people are writing could be helpful for us. Maybe some time to chat/plan between the video [exchange] folks or other cross-site developments.

Audrey (Appelsies, 2/19/96) responded with a burning issue she wanted to make certain we would address, one that had both general network implications (What do we do for

colleagues working in districts where they encounter resistance and opposition?) and site-specific ones (How do we articulate for our colleagues the way in which our work is a philosophy of teaching and not a "project"?):

> One issue I am concerned about is why this "type" of teaching is so controversial? Why do Laura and Debbie have to defend themselves to administrators? Why do my lesson plans come back to me with a note from the department head, "After your project is through we need to meet to plan how your students can do more TAAS writing (TAAS is the standardized test, it only really counts in 8th grade)??? I don't feel like this project will ever be through! It's not a unit of study, but a way of teaching? Who understands me?

We continued to learn from one another and to learn from those experiences. As Toby (Curry, 3/2/96) noted:

> I'm sure I haven't clearly communicated to all of you how grateful I am for the thoughtful discussion topics and how when we pose questions for each other it nudges us all to think through what we do and why we do it. Our younger teachers like Audrey, Laura, Jennifer and Kevin and how wise they are at such a young age especially awe me . . . I'm really beginning to value the possibilities of mentoring and sharing with one another in our WFYL work . . . Thanks to all of you for helping me rethink the research process I use with my kids and for stimulating my thinking about reaching out to community . . . And Omelia, Gloria and Marsha I think that your outreach to community with a parent portfolio night is a great idea. I'm thinking about trying it on at Dewey, but I haven't thought it through yet . . .

Two of the values of networking that I noted in the introduction to this chapter are that it provides participants with a broader frame of reference than their

local practice and settings allow, and it provides some "political protection" by giving participants a site in which they are able to share and explore thinking that might be considered problematic in their local culture. For instance, Heather Sparks (10/4/96), an elementary school teacher in Oklahoma City, noted as we began to discuss our readings of E. D. Hirsch:

> This week's topic (Sizer & Hirsch) really caught my attention because for two years our site has been an OCPS pilot for Hirsch's core knowledge curriculum . . . of course within the district there is no hope for finding anyone who will offer up any challenge and question anything with me. I look forward to sharing our ideas and questions with one another . . .

The listserv conversation became a site where bonds between individuals could be strengthened as they sought in "political safety" to better understand the political dimensions of literacy teaching.

As I noted earlier, I initially imagined that the listserv would be a site in which we would not only take care of project business and share resources with one another, but it would also be a place in which we could function as a network by sharing the unfolding work at individual sites. Without a doubt one of the most popular subject lines developed on the listserv in response to my asking teachers if they would open "Classroom Windows" and let us "observe"

what was going on in their classrooms. The listserv became a the source of rich pictures of the work at the various sites and of a rich discussion of the nature of the collaborations at particular sites.

Discussions of K-12/University Networking on the Listserv

Some have questioned whether K-12/university projects can be truly collaborative in nature and whether the work is actually collegial. This issue became a topic of discussion in the WFYL project listserv on more than one occasion. The discussions highlighted distinctions that may exist in different kinds of collaborations: cross-institutional collaborations that take place in "distant" sites, such as listservs; at gatherings scheduled to take place at the meetings of existing/established organizations like NCTE, and those that take place in particular locales. Although in five years of recorded conversations, none of the classroom teachers ever referred to their university partners by anything other than a first name, Omelia (Donahoo, 10/25/95) (whose university collaborator was always "Pat") made this initial observation: "I can't believe I'm calling college professors I don't even know by their first names. WOW!"

David (Schaafsma, 10/25/95) responded:

> But we are all teachers, Omelia! Why set things up where the college profs get all the respect? We have all taught in schools in this project, all of us who are now in universities and colleges. . . .

And the distinctions in "stature" weren't limited to nominal references. Later Audrey would speculate on issues of racism at her own site and across sites—particularly why racism was explicitly a student-named research issue at some sites where there were very few students of color, yet not at her site where the students were predominantly of color. After her own speculation, she asked (Appelsies, 1/30/96): "Any prof [university participant] have anything to say about that?"

David (Schaafsma, 1/30/96) in a similarly self-deprecating fashion, responded:

> As a "prof" I am sure I have no special insight into this situation, Audrey, sorry . . . I just have a Ph.D.; that process could actually have inhibited any wisdom I might have had when I was young.

Long-standing notions of status rankings surfaced despite the fact that the university participants regularly worked to dispel them. Over time, and as we continued to collaborate by networking both on the listserv and off, we began to see even the few teachers who initially expressed deference to university faculty began to feel much more assured. It didn't take long for Audrey, for instance, to begin to chide David that his responses were like "cheerleading" and needed to be more substantial ("Where's

the 'juice'?" [Appelsies, 1/29/96]) including sharing his own work; to which David (Schaafsma, 1/29/96) good-naturedly replied in a subsequent message:

> Laura, the racism [exploration by students] sounds great, and would love to hear more about it as it proceeds (Okay, I know that does SOUND like superficial cheerleading, Audrey, OKAY.).

In fact, the "professional pedestals" went both ways. University faculty with great regularity on and off the listserv noted that they were "dispensable," and that it was the classroom teachers who were integral to the work and the students. This viewpoint led to expressions of envy and admiration. Joye (Alberts, 1998) reflected:

> I admit to wishing from time to time that I could be a teacher in a WFYL classroom. Would I be as courageous? Could I make a difference in the lives of adolescents like the teachers who take part in this program? They are doing such hard but important work and we are learning so much as a result.

Our relationships to one another and to our work have served as a significant conversational thread on the listserv. For example, after a visit to the Detroit WFYL classrooms in October of 1995, I (Swenson, 10/15/95) asked participants to think with me about the role of university participants:

> I walk through the door and hear muted voices, "Come here, Ms. Swenson, come sit by us." When they are told they can share their writing, they compete for the

> opportunity to read to me. It's caused me to think about the role of the "guest" in the classroom—What is the value of another pair of ears and eyes in the classroom? What's the best use of my time and energy while I'm there and as I prepare to go there? How can I be part of the community when I can only be there once a week at best? In what ways could my presence be detrimental to the classroom community? How can I avoid that? I'm interested in hearing about the role of the "insider/outsider" in other people's classrooms.

In response, Tony (Tendero, 10/16/95) noted that he, too, was pondering his role as he shifted from classroom teacher to university participant, and that he could clearly define workshopping writing with project students a valuable contribution.

While our discussions of K-12/university collaborations often led us to extol their virtues, this was not always the case. One discussion particularly provided us an opportunity to engage in *praxis*-oriented research on the nature of such collaborations. The conversation surfaced on 11/26/96, after a conference presentation in which we intended to focus on K-12/university collaborations, but in which we, in fact, looked focally at WFYL in particular classrooms. Following this meeting, I heard criticism from some classroom teachers who felt some of the university participants had been "too present" in the panel presentation.

Feeling that I might be opening a "Pandora's Box" and exposing "structural faults" in the very foundations of our

project, I created a subject line, "Important Conversation?" (Swenson, 11/26/96) and invited others to think with me about the constitution of school-university collaborations that were valued by all participants. I recounted the project's historical evolution--including the closer linking of university partners to classroom sites and more regular visits by university participants in WFYL classrooms. I asked participants whether they felt that university connections were important to the work we were doing.

Many of the participants responded with their personal insights and observations about the potential of K-12/university collaborations. Audrey (Appelsies, 11/26/96) was the first to affirm that "this IS a very important conversation." She went on to note that Colleen had had a "tremendous impact" on her teaching and professional growth. She credited Colleen with bringing her into this professional conversation, teaching her how to turn a "researcher's eyes" on her classroom, and teaching her to evaluate literacy curricula with a critical eye. She closed by observing that she was committed to WFYL and its growth and that it was her perception that it wouldn't be able to grow without the involvement of university participants. Grace Martino Brewster (Brewster, 1996), a middle school English teacher

from Austin, Texas, and Colleen's classroom collaborator after Audrey moved to Minnesota, voiced similar observations.

Colleen (Fairbanks, 12/2/96) responded to the query and their responses by noting:

> How do I fit in? As co-learner, resource person, all of those roles that you've [Janet] identified . . . What do I contribute? Assisting in the classroom, providing resources, sharing my experiences . . . support, (and not to be too crass) the power (and perhaps the shield) of the University in helping to convince administrators of the importance of such programs . . . Like you, Janet, I worry that I don't or can't spend enough time in the classroom, that I can't be enough support, or that my contributions are too small. I suppose that's what keeps me humble—the work of teachers in projects like WFYL is so awesome, it reminds me of how much I have yet to learn. . . .

Debbie (Kinder, 12/2/96), who had been without a university partner since David's move to New York, observed:

> The commitment of university people to be co-learners with public school teachers is the key to the relationship working. When I am treated with respect as a co-learner, rather than someone who needs to be taught, I am more likely to extend the learning invitation to my students and work with them as a co-learner . . . So, Janet, I want to stress the importance of recruiting university people who believe in the magical opportunities for teachers on all levels to be students as well as teachers.

Sarah (Robbins, 12/3/96), the university participant in Marietta, Georgia, noted:

> Time in classrooms is always reciprocally nurturing . . . I always feel frustrated I can't spend more time in classrooms of colleagues I respect . . . I prefer to write WITH my colleagues, not about them, and I often

find myself wondering if I'd had the benefit of a university partner in my K-12 classroom would I ever have gone back to graduate school again?

Beth (Steffen, 11/29/96), who had never had the benefit of a university partner, having joined the network in Wisconsin after David left, shared her observations:

> Even though I'm officially new to WFYL and new in a place where we have no official university person, I know the support and facilitation of a university person would be valuable. In April in Charlotte [at NCTE] Debbie, Laura and I are presenting about times we use inquiry-based projects that were potentially controversial, and those of you who were involved last year know that Debbie and Laura had massive headaches with their administrators because of the work they did. The only reason my story is different is because my principal is a living god among administrators who cuts his teachers a lot of slack when kids are engaged in active curriculum [learning]. Being a progressive educator, even in a progressive school is stressful, and when one does projects like those we do in WFYL, one is out on a limb. The support and networking available through WFYL is invaluable, as are the shared stories of others doing progressive, even radical work.

Andy Fishman (12/4/96), a university collaborator from West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania, noted that she just "loves being back in the classroom," seeing herself serving as "co-teacher, sounding board, resource person," but worried that she might be "superfluous." She was grateful the conversation was raised on-line and noted that she and Diane, her classroom colleague, would continue it off-line.

Tony (Tendero, 1/8/97) noted that he and David work as the "outside audience" to which students present their work. He also noted that they think with teachers about how to reform their practices to address such local concerns as standardized reading tests and scores.

In a closing note to this conversation on collaborations and networking, Audrey (Appelsies, 1/16/97) logged on again a year later, having left Texas and her collaboration with Colleen and having become a project teacher in Minneapolis, MN, to express her concerns:

> I'm here. Reading, thinking, wishing I was "more a part" of things. Any suggestions . . .? How might I find a university collaborator? . . . We are having lots of problems maintaining a sense of community . . . many disruptive kids. I have been trying to create a "safe" environment . . . Jen remember your class last year? Can you tell me more about it? What kind of things worked for you [in dealing with disruptive students and establishing a classroom community]?

Expanding the Net: Supporting Teachers Entering the Network Conversation

As the project developed, we realized that if the network were to become and stay healthy, we needed to use the listserv to welcome and scaffold the participation of teachers new to the project. Audrey (Appelsies, 11/25/95) logged on the first time with this observation:

> I just wanted you to know that I am on-line and have been reading your conversations for a while. I thought it would be easier for me to write to you once we met. I was right. I had an amazing trip to NCTE but

> meeting and talking on Sunday to you was the highlight. I am thrilled to be working on this project with all of you.

Audrey's second entry created an interesting dilemma for other listserv participants—Debbie had shared a vignette regarding a high school senior student's journal entry in which he expressed his resistance to sharing personal writing. Audrey (Appelsies, 12/18/95) wrote back:

> You have a wonderful chance to teach Jeremy and all of your students true respect. I would let him know in no uncertain terms can he bash others and at the same time let everyone else know you respect Jeremy's state of mind too.
>
> With 6th graders I have to constantly, at times blatantly, insist on "respectful listening." I also suggest giving Jeremy the option to not participate in the sharing times and see how long he decides to remain out of the group.

In only her second entry on the listserv, Audrey had clearly misread a colleague's message. Colleen, David, Debbie, and I each wrote back, moving the conversation back to its original intent, but in each case, ending with direct questions to Audrey—attempts to keep her in conversation (What are your students doing? What part of the Midwest are you from originally?). These moves, characteristic of those that participants made toward one another allowed Audrey a warm welcome as well as a comfortable space to adjust her reading. As she noted (Appelsies, 12/19/95), she had simply

done what we all do so often—read the text through her own lived classroom experience:

> Thanks for clarifying what happened with Jeremy. I was definitely writing from my own experience . . . in other words my students, when they have a complaint about my teaching or the matters at hand, tend to just shout it out, for everyone to hear. Such is the nature of 6th graders. In that way, I am constantly challenged.

Over time, Audrey became one of the most active members in our professional dialogues (see Appendix D)—and one of its staunchest advocates. She relied heavily on her colleagues to address her questions, questions that reflect the range of concerns many new teachers, especially those attempting to teach in ways they had not experienced themselves as students:

> (Appelsies, 1/4/95):
> Sure, I've done writer's workshop "write whatever you want to write about" classes, but this is different. What I am afraid of is that I will guide too much out of a fear that they won't do anything if I don't "give" them something to do? I don't want this to become another project where I say one thing (this is your project) and do another (it must be about what I consider a valid issue) . . . Next week we will be forming research questions . . . I want so much for this to come from them. How can I be sure that it [the selection of research topics] doesn't turn into my agenda?

> (Appelsies, 1/4/95):
> The learning/struggling today was difficult for me and my students. I said aloud to one class, "I know this is hard, but I trust in the process. We will figure it out." What do you think of all of this [our

difficulty in naming issues embedded in student writing]?

(Appelsies, 1/9/96):
[On a letter exchange between colleague's students] What were the letters mostly about? Did the enthusiasm for writing them change as the kids got to know each other a little? . . . [Later on 1/15/96, based on the responses to her previous questions] I want my students to articulate what they are doing and get replies . . . so they can realize they are part of a bigger project. I'm sure they'd like to see what your [Laura's] students have done. Will they like to correspond with little 6th graders?

(Appelsies, 1/30/96):
[In response to a colleague's ability to orchestrate a good class discussion in which students appeared to have generated valuable insights for one another following a standardized writing test] Also, I want a valuable discussion after the writing assessment [like Sarah's]. I could only wish for a carry over like that. It says a lot about the project. What topics are coming up [in the continuing discussion]????

(Appelsies, 1/30/96):
[In response to a colleague who noted that her white students were wondering what school might be like for small numbers of black students in their building] On a recent standardized test they [my students] had to fill in race, and they didn't know what to write. I do wonder if our kids [in our exchange between our classes] will notice their . . . I don't know how to write this . . . differences. And why do your students [mostly white] wonder about race when it still hasn't come up in my room, even when we talk about gangs? Any prof out there want to address this?

(Appelsies, 2/15/96):
I've never done this before [written for publication]. Anyone have any suggestions of how to start?

(Appelsies, 2/19/96):
One issue I am concerned about is why this "type" of teaching is so controversial? Why do Laura and Debbie have to defend themselves to administrators? Why do

my lesson plans come back to me with a note from the department head, "After your project is through we need to meet to plan how your students can do more TAAS writing (TAAS is the standardized test, it only really counts in 8th grade)??? I don't feel like this project will ever be through! It's not a unit of study, but a way of teaching? Who understands me?

(Appelsies, 4/14/96):
Why do you all think that it is so hard to be always pondering things? Is it because "people" want things neat and tidy and explained?

(Appelsies, 4/15/96):
One other thing . . . any suggestions that come to mind after reading my brief sketches of the service learning projects? Let me know.

(Appelsies, 4/22/96):
Why does it seem like such a huge group have it [teaching] all figured out and those of us who wonder aloud about it are shut down?

(Appelsies, 9/5/96):
[to Toby] How did you start it [your Traveling Parent Journals]? What did you expect from the parents? How did you keep it going?

(Appelsies, 1/11/97):
I'm here. Reading, thinking, wishing I were "more a part" of things. Any suggestions . . . ? How might I find a university collaborator?

(Appelsies, 1/11/97):
We are having lots of problems maintaining a sense of community . . . many disruptive kids. I have been trying to create a "safe" environment . . . Jen, Remember your class last year? Can you tell me more about it? What kinds of things worked for you?

(Appelsies, 4/18/97):
Am I now reinforcing my students' skeptical attitudes towards whites? Are there any books out there where I am not the bad guy? Suggestions [on whether/how to read books with themes of racial hatred/tension without reinforcing those beliefs]?

> (Appelsies, 9/3/97):
> Anyone have any suggestions about how to continue to build up the group, the shared decision making . . . What is a socially just classroom to you? Any words will keep me focused!

> (Appelsies, 9/17/97):
> I asked them [the teachers in the teacher research group I have formed] to come next time with a question about their teaching/the kids . . . some place to begin. I also will have some reading to use as a discussion point. Any suggestions are welcome. Have any of you done this before [started a TR group]?

Perhaps Audrey's most telling affirmation of the usefulness of her network dialogue is that she used it to solicit help for her sister (Appelsies, 8/14/97):

> My sister Ellen moved to Tokyo and got a job teaching 7th grade at an International School. She will be teaching all subjects except math. Does anyone have any suggestions I can pass on to her?

As a recipient of responses that scaffolded her entry into and participation in the professional dialogues in which project teachers engaged, at the appropriate time, Audrey was able to enlist her WFYL colleagues to support another teacher's entrance into the network.

Diane (Doherty, 9/7/97), who had joined the project late in the 1996-97 academic year, observed that she was pleased with what she and her WFYL partners had accomplished the previous year but knew they could do more. She went on to explain:

> Unfortunately I was hesitant about sharing because I felt intimidated by all of you…you do such wonderful things that I didn't think I could add anything of significance. Andy Fishman has been very supportive, however, and I am determined to be a real part of things this year. This year I'm working with a colleague in his 2nd year of teaching, and we hope our students will collaborate.

Debbie (Kinder, 9/7/97) welcomed Diane by observing:

> Your stories sound wonderful and I hope you'll share them with us this year. Several years ago, when this project began, I felt intimidated by some amazing teacher in WFYL. But we agreed that WFYL would look different in every classroom and the excitement of beginning this project would be in seeing all the variations which would occur in each unique classroom. So we want to know how it works for you and your kids. Have a good year and keep us posted.

And Beth (Steffen, 9/7/97) added:

> Geez, Diane, I sure think that [we can do more] every day—that there's more to be done—hearing the variety of stories from different sites helps, though, with perspective, with idea, and with inspiration.

Audrey (Appelsies, 9/8/97) chimed in:

> Diane I understand what you are saying and have often felt the same way. The amount of experience and incredible things that WFYL teachers are doing in their classrooms is both a source of inspiration and awe for me. I wrote a lot the first year and hardly at all last year because I could hardly keep my head above the water…but I always read the listserv because I would love knowing what everyone else was doing and the challenges we continue to face. I'll look forward to hearing about your classroom.

Diane (Doherty, 9/8/97) responded to the warm welcome she had been extended:

> It was so good of you all to write words of encouragement. Last year I felt like a watcher; this year I'll be a player . . . Coatesville is home to county public housing, and the largest percentage of citizens on public assistance in the county. But our kids are innocent, hopeful, caring, and mostly ambitious. Despite the fact that many of them have problems we can only imagine, they show up for school and want us to make a difference. We take all the steps we can to help them and then we take even one more step. I love my job and my kids. I hope you'll love them too.

Creating and Validating Networks for Our Students

WFYL participants strengthened the network not only by using the listserv conversation to validate their networking, but also to highlight the benefits of networking for their students. Network exchanges for students took shape as another web of opportunities. Students had their own listserv; numerous letter, video, and anthology exchanges; and cross site visitations.

For instance, as we worked to develop a conference proposal for NCTE, Laura (Vander Ploeg, 1/16/97), whose students had been very active on the listserv, noted:

> Janet, in response to your question, the aspect of the project that I feel I could present on . . . [are] the possibilities of student exchange through the listserv. The unfolding exchange over Autumn's poem is really fascinating to me, and she is an interesting story unto herself. I think the support she's getting from other students is helping her work through some things she is struggling with. In general, I am interested in ways that we can connect students from different sites and the possibilities that lie therein.

Letter, video and anthology exchanges played a critical role in many WFYL classrooms. Laura (Vander Ploeg, 1/28/97) expressed the excitement that many participants and their students experienced when she responded to Audrey in Minnesota and Tony in New York City after they had expressed an interest in the research video her students were producing:

> Audrey & Tony, I asked all of my classes last week if they wanted to send their videos to other WFYL classrooms and the response was overwhelmingly YES!! They are psyched! Some kids want to pull together a video letter too…This could turn into an on-going thing. I love it. [she then discussed the specifics of how to manage such an exchange before tackling a different subject] I am also wondering how out kids can help each other with their research. Our students are doing amazing things and it would be great if they could experience a sense of WFYL community in their endeavors. For example: One of my classes is doing a We-Search on racism in their school and community and is planning to argue that MLK JR Day should be honored as an official holiday in the Janesville School District. (Footnote: Janesville is the home of the KKK Grand Wizard and has a notorious reputation as a racist community; 97% of my kids are white). They could really use the perspectives and experiences of students of color in their search. Would your kids be willing to help out in that way?

Beth (Steffen, 9/7/97) articulated the value of connecting her students from urban Beloit, Wisconsin, with those from suburban West Chester, Pennsylvania: "Having your

kids as readers will help my students care about the quality and content of their work."

Pat (Fox, 1/11/96), responded to the perceived value of networking on the part of students in this way:

> Thanks for asking about what's going on here in Georgia in Omelia and Gloria's classrooms. The answer is lots. We are all three lurking on the net here savoring your rich (I am tempted to say "delicious" [a reference to conversations on eating]) conversations inquiring into the tensions between public and private topics and issues [centered on] student ownership and teacher direction. We brought both classes to campus on Dec 1st for a WFYL workshop day during which we read and responded to pieces from Laura's [students' anthology] *Dreamwatchers* and Tony's [students'] Write for Your Life anthologies. The kids ate them up . . . and were touched to know that they were really part of a bigger WFYL enterprise, that other young people elsewhere were being taken seriously and being asked to speak about and to crucial issues in their lives.

In addition to networking, students were able, on occasion, to gather with students from other sites in face-to-face meetings. During 1994-95, for instance, students from all of the Michigan sites gathered for a day-long Manuscript Day on the Michigan State University campus, and the Wisconsin students gathered for a similar day on The University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. Smaller cross-site groups also met occasionally. For instance students from urban Flint came to the MSU campus to workshop their papers in collaboration with students from rural Montrose. One of

the most productive student collaborations involved two year-long letter exchanges between WFYL students in rural Platteville and urban Beloit. These exchanges culminated in day-long meetings in the spring of 1996 and again in 1997. Having voiced concerns that students from both sites had preconceived, stereotyped, and generally negative images of what the students at the other site were like, teachers noted on the listserv that the letter exchanges and meetings were instrumental in changing those images.

Networking on the Listserv: The "Value Added"?

The excerpts from the WFYL log reports that I have presented here document the value teachers in the project placed on networking. Repeated examples of cross-site sharing for the purpose of motivating students' learning suggests one reason they valued the WFYL network. But teachers valued it for more than the ways in which it benefited their students' work.

Many have noted that teachers often suffer from isolation. They work in classrooms with their students and seldom have "quality" time to share their concerns, questions, and joys regarding their students, teaching, and their own learning with other equally engaged educators. Several of the participants on the listserv alluded to this

reality. In January 1996, Laura (Vander Ploeg, 1/6/96) commented, "Sorry to talk your collective ears off, but it's lonely here." Later, Audrey (Appelsies 1/15/96), who wanted to ask Laura additional questions lamented, "Laura, I sure do wish you could check your e-mail more often." Even after years of project involvement, Audrey (Appelsies, 10/13/97) would log on this past October (1997) to observe: "I have so much to say. Do you mind listening?"

Teachers' calls for personal and professional companionship were as frequent as were their expressions of appreciation of one another. Perhaps the most poignant of testimonials for the project and listserv came from Gloria Dukes (9/11/96), a middle school English teacher from Savannah, Georgia, just after she had a new student teacher assigned to her classroom. To begin her WFYL activities with her eighth-graders, Gloria had invited them to write narratives about their lives. When Sharonda, her student teacher, began reading the student papers, she was completely nonplussed by the stories. Students shared details about their family structures. Many were being raised by grandparents or in foster care. And they shared their fears about violent incidents that happened with great regularity in their neighborhoods. They spelled out the ways in which

living in poverty made them yearn for what they could not have. And they expressed their sorrow at the lives of loved ones who were falling prey to substance abuse. Sharonda wept and asked Gloria how she had learned to deal with the knowledge that these students dealt with such circumstances in their lives. Gloria responded:

> I told her about you all and programs like WFYL and Project Outreach [an NWP, DeWitt Wallace funded program for teachers working in low-income school districts] and how [they] have helped me learn to hold it all together at least until I make it to the car.

Gloria went on to ask the rest of us:

> What do you tell a new teacher on the verge of entering a classroom where she'll be confronted with all of these issues? HELP! This all speaks to the issue of preparing pre-service teachers for the "real world of teaching."

Other teachers wrote testimonials of the value of the listserv in their professional lives as well. Omelia (Donahoo, 1/17/96), absent from the list for several weeks at the beginning of 1996, logged on to note:

> Sorry to have been out of touch for so long. I have been our of town with a serious family illness . . . I came back Monday to a TON of e-mail . . . Needless to say these conversations deserve several going-throughs. I am especially motivated by Audrey, Laura, Debbie and Tony's ideas. I can't wait to go through again to glean the wonderful ideas. Keep them coming.

Laura (Vander Ploeg, 10/7/97), who had moved from a school in Janesville, Wisconsin, to a school in the Bronx in New York City, talked to others about her struggles:

> Teaching has been a struggle…I've been spending a lot of my energy on behavior management and trying to establish a safe and respectful environment. It has been a difficult community this year because so many of my students know and dislike each other and have a negative history as a group. There have been two fights within my homeroom group in the past month, and four suspensions. A rough start, to say the least. Audrey, and Kevin, I am also wondering about ways to teach listening and respect. Are you making any progress out there?

Audrey (Appelsies, 10/8/97), commiserating on the challenges of establishing a respectful community that encourages learning and teaching, responded as part of a much longer, more helpful message:

> Laura, wow, things sound very different from Janesville. A whole new set of problems to learn from . . . Toby suggested to me last year that I survey my students to find out what they think of the year so far . . . I know what you mean when you say you are revising yourself. That was exactly what I did last year . . . How did I get through it? E-mail with you guys . . .

It also became clear that the value of the conversations wasn't only for classroom teachers. Beth (Steffen, 11/29/96) commented that the methods course she had had with David and Debbie--in which she had been asked to reflect on the "whys" of her practice, to articulate her philosophy of teaching the English language arts--had been "a defining moment in my

life." Toby (Curry, 11/29/96) responded to her, affirming the value of effective pre-service teacher preparation programs:

> Beth, your writing really affirms the need for teachers like Janet, David, Colleen, Pat and Sarah to continue their outreach into the preservice teacher ED programs. When I look back on my own development, for the first 12 years of my work, I learned to teach by trial and error, except for 10 weeks of modeling responding to kids' writing from an exceptional English teacher at Detroit's Mumford High School, a brilliant Irishman named Joseph Curran. I had been teaching over a decade before I met Debi Goodman and her parents Ken and Yetta and it was also then that I was introduced to David Bloome, an extraordinary ethnographer. I know precisely what meeting those great teachers did for my own coming to know and the need to help young teachers discover their own literacy while helping their students "join the literacy club" (Frank Smith) is crucial.

Judith Doherty, a university collaborator working in teacher education at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, responded to them both by noting that their concerns were a major concern in the teacher preparation program at University of Massachusetts. The benefits of the networking on the listserv were rippling out and effecting other groups of educators as well. Judith (Doherty, 1996) exhorted us: "Let's keep this conversation alive."

Finally, in 1997, after I had announced to those on the listserv that I wanted to focus on their conversation for this dissertation, Tony (Tendero, 10/6/97)—who had been participating in the conversation since the project's

inception in 1993, first as a classroom teacher and in 1997 as a university Ph.D. student working in another teacher's classroom—noted:

> I think Janet's instinct to look at this conversation is so right. Some of the best teachers I know are talking about stuff like literacy and social action, how could I be too swamped to respond?

But the listserv wasn't for everyone. Implicitly teachers validated the listserv conversation through their participation, and though participation generally was "sporadic and episodic" as the definition of networks suggests it might be, participation surpassed "common wisdom," which suggests that there is a rule of "80-20" in listserv conversations—that is, that 80% of the conversation is contributed by 20% of the participants. In the three most recent years of the WFYL listserv in which a core group of participants have remained constant, 80% of the conversation was generated first by 40% of the participants (95-96) then 38% (96-97) and during the current year, 45%. Regular apologies to one another for absences from the conversation suggest that participants would like to "log on" even more often than they already do.

In addition, the participation tables documenting the listserv's evolution (see Appendix D) indicate increasing

"contributions" to it rather than "withdrawals" from it. The contributions include significantly higher levels of participation by Debbie and Beth which *may* suggest that listserv conversations are even more important to teachers without university collaborators. Many participants noted that they were lurking (reading without writing) for reasons that varied from being newcomers (for instance, Audrey and Diane), to being under stress (Toby and Debbie), to being unable to keep up with the pace (Jennifer and Joye), to self-doubts over the value of their contributions (Omelia and often university collaborators).

Participants also acknowledged the limitations of the medium. Particularly when dealing with sensitive issues, participants noted that they missed being able to read the body language of their listeners, some indicated a preference for face-to-face interactions; and some observed that the listserv was an "unavoidable gap-filling" measure. The nature of the relationship between those who taught in various types of institutions also differed on the listserv and in face-to-face interactions.

As persuaded as I am that the WFYL listserv served as a source of authentic professional development for teachers and that other inquiry-based project listservs could be developed

to offer similar opportunities to other educators, As appealing as face-to-face interactions are because they include tone and gesture, teachers' busy personal and professional lives and the cost of travel for a national network like ours made regular face-to-face networking impossible—and particularly difficult to arrange "at the point of need"—that is at the particular time that any of the participants need it rather than on a regularly scheduled basis.

Listserv conversations become more acceptable, even desirable, when we consider that they are available "at the point of need": They can be fit into teachers' busy, programmed schedules, and they bring geographically-distant colleagues together. While listserv conversations cannot replace face-to-face networking, they are a valuable extension for them and replacement for them when face-to-face networking is not possible. I am convinced that there is a place for inquiry-based project listserv conversations to address teacher isolation and to function as a support group for teachers—particularly new teachers.

On reflection, I see that our work to strengthen network ties, to create a "healthy" network, was invaluable to creating a site in which WFYL teachers might find "authentic"

professional development opportunities to be created and taken up. By reminding ourselves of our commitment to our common project goals and to the network community in which we were working together, we established a culture that invited us to find time in busy personal and professional lives to teach and learn from one another.

Reflecting on how the conversation had influenced participants' thinking about one another, Jennifer (Tendero, 1998) wrote:

> I believe teachers need to talk about their classroom practices with each other. The sharing of stories, ideas, is invaluable, but seems overwhelming at times also. I prefer conversation face to face, with processing time built into them. It is a luxury to have these conversations, I know, and it's easy to rely on that luxury rather than work on making conversation with teachers on the listserv.

And Andy noted in her reflection (March, 1998):

> It [the listserv conversation] has illustrated/ reinforced my belief in the power of professional communities. I've seen some of these folks blossom in so many ways because of the support they receive.

3. Teachers in Healthy Networks Develop a System of Interpersonal Relationships that Establish Feelings of Safety, Engagement, and Stimulation.

> Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society. The teachers I studied work in opposition to the system that employs them. They are critical of the way that the school system treats employees, students,

> parents, and activists in the community. However, they cannot let their critique reside solely in words. They must turn it into action by challenging the system. What they do is both their lives and their livelihoods. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 128)

What does it mean to trust another educator, another person? What does it mean to truly collaborate? Why is "safety" such an important feature for a network? What evidence would support the contention that these qualities characterized the relationships of those on-line in the WFYL listserv? Richard Elmore (1996) suggests the importance of the relationships between teachers, "Deep and sustained change requires that people feel a personal commitment to each other" (paper presented at the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, CPRE, 1996).

Perhaps the best evidence of trust among and between listserv participants may be found in our willingness to tackle issues so sensitive and vexed in this nation that many simply refrain from discussing them at all. We had frank discussions about our own shortcomings as teachers, our own relationships with one another, our concerns regarding race and equity, and our positions regarding homosexuality. We trusted one another sufficiently to express our disagreements and try to understand why we disagreed.

One of the greatest challenges for educators is finding a safe place to share their fears about their teaching and classrooms—a place where they can express their discomforts and frustrations and receive, in response, not only empathy, but also advice for ways in which to respond to difficult situations. Each year of the project, at least one conversation has emerged in which one or more of the parties involved initially wanted either to drop a topic of conversation or move it off the listserv. In each case, the conversation appeared to become an opportunity for collaboration and trust building.

Our own frustrations

In 1993-94, Linda noted that she had "grave reservations" about establishing a site of the project with her own students because of discipline problems she was encountering, but noted that she would be happy to work with Alan, a colleague in her building, to help him establish a site with his students. Because at that point it was hard to determine the origin of messages unless the writer remembered to sign them, David (Schaafsma, 10/7/94) wrote back asking who had voiced "grave reservations," and Linda (Rebney, 10/7/94) replied:

> Linda R has some reservations, but nothing she wants to discuss via the Confer [listserv] right now. I'm working on it. Thank you for all [your] concern.

David (Schaafsma, 10/8/94) quickly responded the next day: "Linda, I think your concerns could be addressed right here. Possibly."

By keeping the conversation on the listserv, Linda had repeated opportunities to explain more fully both her own concerns about her practice.

> (Rebney, 10/10/94):
> I don't like the discomfort [a new curriculum] creates for me.

> (Rebney, 11/22/94):
> I'm hard on myself because I want to see where things are headed and I have a hard time with uncharted waters.

> (Rebney, 12/6/94):
> There are so many questions and needs for feedback and response that I end each day feeling absolutely shredded.

She also received validation, consolation, and encouragement from Jane Denton Jurgens (10/10/94), a language arts coordinator in Saginaw, Michigan:

> I know the easiest thing for teachers to do is go back to the old ways just to keep control…I know what you are experiencing is not fun, especially with all your experience.

And, from Debbie (Kinder, 11/18/94) when things were going well: "It sounds like magic [the way students are now responding in class]."

In addition, participants suggested specific ways in which we could work together to address her concerns. I offered this strategy (Swenson, 11/23/94):

> . . . writing for the sake of writing doesn't appeal to large groups of students, but writing for self-defined purposes does. So, if [your] students can find a focus—perhaps a social action project that confronts what they feel is an intimate concern--the writing will improve because of the writer's engagement.

And Alan (Shinaver, 3/8/95) modeled this one:

> They're [my students] writing grants to install peer counseling [and] peer mediation [and] publishing their progress, holding a press conference, and getting a speakers series going . . . I panicked last Friday and gave my grant writers an assignment to 'describe for me' [what they have learned] . . . a million things to do with the grant and our class [emerged]. Their comparisons of the larger community and their school [were wonderful].

Sensitive issues

In 1995-96, Laura and Audrey agreed to conduct a video letter exchange between their students. Laura's students, almost all of them white and middle-to-upper class, had named community racism, particularly as they perceived it in their school district's refusal to acknowledge Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as the focus of one group's research. They also expressed curiosity about how the few African American students in their building experienced school in a

predominantly white community. Laura thought the video exchange with Audrey's predominantly Hispanic and African American students might be one way to get at their concerns.

After Laura (Vander Ploeg, 1/28/96) posted a note to that effect, Audrey (Appelsies, 1/30/96) wrote back that she was really curious about why Laura's students were focusing on "how do I say this . . . our differences" and suggested that she would call Laura so they could talk about the issue on the telephone.

That same day, David (Schaafsma, 1/30/96) responded:

> I'm interested in lots of things about this letter. Made me stop and think about changing perspectives and assumptions about race…But I do think that I want to hear your discussion about the letter on e-mail. Especially if the exchange might prove to help us with the challenges of talking across and about differences.

David's assumption that we had an opportunity here to learn much was well founded. Conversations about race continue to unfold and, I (Swenson, 2/1/95) wrote to participants:

> One reason the face-to-face WFYL meetings are so important is to establish the sense of trust and community that will allow us to tackle really sensitive issues believing that our readers will be able to interpret our few words in sensitive and compassionate ways. Of all the issues we could discuss, I can't imagine one that requires us all to trust one another as much as a discussion about race. [With that understanding in mind, I asked them to consider these questions:] Do you think in the classroom that we become

> more conscious of characteristics that vary widely between our own students and become fairly oblivious to the characteristics our students share but which might distinguish them greatly from students from other communities? If we do, is that of any concern? If one WFYL class seems not to notice race, and another, with whom they'll communicate, will probably raise the issue of difference, how do we feel about that as educators? Is that an experience we want to foster? What would we do to make it as positive an experience as possible for all concerned?

The conversation begun at that time has continued to be addressed in the on-going project dialogue.

Our own relationships

As I reflected on the difficult issues we tackled during the five years of the project, I am amazed. Frank, honest, dissenting discussions of racism and homophobia preoccupied us during the closing months of the 1996-97 academic year. We trusted one another enough to say what we thought—and we didn't all think alike. As I wondered how we had evolved into a group that was able to speak frankly about difference—among ourselves and our students—I realized we had learned "to tack near and far," to use Clifford Geertz's terms, between our personal lives and our professional lives. The opening conversation in the 1997-98 academic year shows us making those moves.

Many WFYL participants, parents who were perhaps sensitized by Lisa Delpit's (1996) essay and text by the same

name, *Other People's Children*, would often couch reflections on our practice by illustrating them with what we wanted for our own children inside and outside school settings. Realizing that I had just sent my oldest child off to college, Debbie inquired what that was like. I (Swenson, 9/3/97), in Geertz's terms "tacked near" to a "personal shore":

> Seems like borders, boundaries, points of transition—demarcation, embarkation, are all interesting, exciting places offering us opportunities to grow and extend ourselves. New jobs, new relationships, new readings, new friends . . . seeing a child off to college and setting one less place at the table [is another opportunity to grow]. Thanks for asking, Debbie—that puddle you see forming in front of your monitor is—I'm sure—just an excess of some growth hormone I'm being offered.

And Andy (Fishman, 9/3/97) used it as an opportunity to "tack far":

> So characteristic of you to turn pain into something profound. Reminds me of a notion I wrestle with frequently, trying to put it in its place: That our personal lives—transitions, triumphs, tragedies, and just daily bumps and bruises—are not only inextricably part of ourselves, but inextricably part of our teaching. We teach who we are no matter what else we think we're teaching. If that's true, however (and this is where the wrestling begins) what are the implications for pre-service education, for in-service development, for hiring practices, for just about everything? It's clearly a truth that publishers, politicians, and administrators don't acknowledge, but imagine the chaos if they did . . . .

At that point, we began an on-line discussion of "teaching and curriculum as autobiography." Audrey (Appelsies, 9/3/97) observed that her perception that "I am not able to participate in decision making at my school. The administration doesn't work that way," had greatly influenced her decision to create a democratic classroom for her students.

> Therefore, in reaction to feeling so powerless in my building, I try to remember that feeling when I work with my students. It's not easy, but I am trying to act on my beliefs. Anyone have any suggestions about how to continue to build this group, the shared decision making? What is a socially just classroom to you? Any words will keep me focused.

The moves here were characteristic of the way our relationships introduced and were fostered by our professional conversations.

Participants also used the conversations to strengthen interpersonal relationships. We rooted for our baseball and football teams, created imaginary teacher readiness tests, and teased one another about everything from the spelling of our names to our southern on-line "accents." We noted the births of new babies and the failing health and deaths of relatives. Playing, mourning and celebrating together sustained us during some of the more difficult conversations on the list.

Those contributing to the WFYL listserv have registered a fair share of affirmations, exhortations, and notes of encouragement, empathy and sympathy. In our personal lives, participants had miscarriages, failed relationships, deaths of family members. We also had new houses, the birth of babies and winning sports seasons. We lived through our children's graduation from high school and entry into college and through unreliable daycare. We doubted ourselves as professionals, were on the verge of quitting, felt beaten up by administrators, endured students who wouldn't sustain discussions, and said repeatedly, "If it weren't for the kids. . . ." We applauded our personal and professional accomplishments. We bonded.

Some teachers faced greater personal and professional challenges than others. Debbie, Laura and Omelia each faced administrators who didn't seem to understand or accept their philosophies of teaching and resultant pedagogies. The nurturing they received consisted both of sympathy and of advice—how they might work toward creating some shared understandings with those administrators.

For instance, Debbie (Kinder, 4/20/96) logged on to tell us of two disturbing incidents in her personal and professional life. A colleague had just been accused of

molesting a student who had been in his class fifteen years ago whose memory had "been repressed" until recently. On the same day, the district director of instruction had informed her that her "special education model of Career English" [her WFYL class] would have to be "revamped to stress technical instead of personal writing." Debbie (4/20/96) went on to add:

> Initially I thought I would send copies of the chapter I've written for the WFYL book and my [dissertation] proposal to the administrators, so they'd understand my curriculum, and we could have this informal conversation. However, they are likely to feel threatened by this and not read it, or they might read it and use it against me. I think it's likely that they will assign a different teacher to do Career English and give me a new assignment, hoping to encourage me to leave. I wonder if it's worth the fight. I would have gladly jumped into the fray a week ago. Now I wonder if I need to back off, because I might need administrative support in case someone decides to accuse me of something I haven't done. I hate feeling gun-shy and suspicious. I BELIEVE in what we're all doing.
>
> I hate sending out this message because it is such a downer. However, as I listen to our conversations, I think many of us are dealing with the same issues. Audrey, are you teaching for the test now? Omelia, did you decide to transfer schools? Laura, how is your principal treating you now? What do you all think? I wish we had a meeting coming up sooner than NCTE in November.

Two days later, I (Swenson, 4/22/96) responded to Debbie and others:

Dear Debbie and All,

Don't hesitate to send messages, Debbie, because they are "downers"—remember that it makes the rest of us feel good to at least attempt to help when we can. I'm going to hope I can make good on this promise—IF I haven't loaned my copy to someone else, I will bring in Eliot Wigginton's *Sometimes a Shining Moment*, Xerox and mail the chapter on making Foxfire "fit the curriculum." Summarized, Wigginton asked his students to look at the curriculum guide, look at what they were doing, determine how what they were already doing fulfilled the school's requirements, and determine what needed to be added. I think this would make an excellent closing exercise for students—to help them process on a concrete, explicit level what they had been doing all year.

On another level, do you have access to the SCANS (Secretary's [of Labor] Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills report? I'd tell the principal, ad nauseum, that you are extremely concerned about preparing your students for the 21st century workplace, and that you have found the Secretary of Labor's suggestions on how you might do that most helpful. That you are relieved that we have a Secretary of Labor with such an enlightened view of education—one that appears to have the backing of all or most Fortune 500 CEOs. They have endorsed a report that calls for students to be able to do the following [a summary of the report follows—see chapter 1] . . .

In a similar fashion you can give evidence that your WFYL curriculum also directly addressed the new national standards for the English language arts. Dog-gone-it, Debbie, don't let them beat you up. Align yourself with those who will most intimidate them—pull out the big guns, Secretary Riley, the Department of Education, five universities around the country, the National Council of Teachers of English. Say it loud, "I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING!!"

Audrey (Appelsies, 4/22/96) responded that same day:

Debbie,

I am so sorry too. While I am not teaching to the test, I go through lots of confusions about what is

"right." Why does it seem like such a huge group have it all figured out and those of us who wonder aloud about it all are shut down? I think your situation is sad. I think you should fight if you have the energy, and do it for the sake of those kids who learn so much about themselves in the time they are with you . . .

As Debbie continued to keep us informed about her situation, Tony (Tendero, 4/24/96) wrote:

Debbie,

Your students have had the privilege of working with you closely. You are right in valuing their expertise.

As I write, I wonder if you are meeting [with the administrators] this morning . . . perhaps now. I'm saying a prayer for you (if you don't mind . . . couldn't hurt, huh?) and thinking about you.

This might seem a little bit of an odd time to mention it . . .but my three years of working with WFYL has allowed me to meet some of the best teachers I know . . . you are one.

In the midst of current teaching conflicts and thinking about past conflicts, I still think these kinds of things can be valuable. I just wish they weren't so damned draining.

Some of the teachers such as Beth, Laura, Tony, and Jennifer faced the challenge all teachers have faced—those early years in the classroom when they are developing their practice. For instance, when Gloria shared her student teacher's tearful response to students' narratives, and asked us how she might advise her student teacher, Andy noted that one possibility was simply to assure the student teacher that she would develop her own set of coping strategies with time. Andy (Fishman, 9/12/96) put it this way:

> . . .A point I would add in terms of student—and new teachers is something I've only realized in thinking about my own experiences over the past almost 30 years. At 21, I was not only a new teacher but a new grownup. My repertoire of responses was limited to those I had developed to that point. I know it isn't immediately helpful to student teachers to tell them this (because I do tell them this and they do tell me it isn't immediately helpful), but it is true and it is reassuring: over time as we grow as people, we discover and/or organically develop different, more differentiated ways to respond to situations. What once prompted a sort of unilateral sadness or despair begins to prompt a more nuanced reaction, giving us more choices of action than we could have imagined in the beginning. I don't mean to sound high falutin' or cold. I just know I play a lot more notes at 49 than I did—or could—at 21.

Finally, some teachers faced particular days in the classroom such as this one that leads Audrey (Appelsies, 4/1/98) to reflect on the role of the listserv in general and its "Classroom Windows" discussion in particular:

> Well the listserv has saved my life more than a few times. Most recently was today when I kept checking my computer and wiping my tears as I struggled and struggled with my students to open things up.
>
> This listserv is so important because (usually) I don't have anyone in this building who "understands" or can "help" me with what I am trying to do I have you all. The face to face conversations, the presentations, the constant classroom windows have made this a very safe place for me. To think that I can write one day that I am afraid, and could you all help me and [then you] send me long responses and encouragement overnight is profound.
>
> I also think it is amazing that I, as a newish classroom teacher, have access to very, very experienced and well read people (who are sometimes called professors). I know we have been through this discussion before but . . . it matters. . . . I feel privileged.

> Today I really was prepared. I thought I had direction for the class. But, I had no clue. The kids wouldn't listen to the poem/picture book on the flag and "being an American" that I had to introduce the idea of what it means to be an American. I was lost . . . until I looked at my desk and saw *Our America* sitting there. I read them a passage about how LeAlan considers himself to live in a second America—in the ghetto—and ya know, I really was afraid to be this forward, I didn't want to put ideas about their circumstances into their heads . . . but I had them write about whether or not they agreed or disagreed and why . . . Mostly they agreed with LeAlan and it seemed like they were opening up . . .
>
> When Mitchell asked them what was missing, the conversation started to flow. They talked about unity and community being missing. They talked about welfare and the checks that will be missing, about the jobs that their parents do and do not have, and about housing and why theirs is all run down, and that they cannot play outside and the choices they have to face . . . I kept thinking about how much I must influence what they do and do not think is okay to talk about in school. At one point Christian said, "all of the buildings that blacks live in are run down and all of the buildings that whites live in" . . . and she looked at me. I am the only white person in the room. I do not assume to know about their lives for I truly am an outsider, and I wonder how much they do not want to divulge to me because I am the white teacher. How much of their lives do they want to bring to me? How much of their questions about their families, their lives, their community do they really want to entrust in me? Do I have the "right" to do this? Yes, I think. Especially when I see Mitchell guiding the discussion, calling on kids to talk, and receiving applause from his peers . . .

In reflections off the listserv, several themes emerged consistently. This one that Kevin (LaPlante, 1998) notes:

> Above all else, our relationships with each other away from the listserv are at the heart of the dynamic exchanges. Unlike other listservs I've experienced, I care for these people.

And this one that Joye (Alberts, 1998) notes when commenting about a particular listserv feature:

> Classroom Windows [was a strand that stood out for her]—this is one of the current, ongoing discussions that seems to have brought out the positively best support from the participants. As I try to nurture along other listservs, I am struck by the need to let a conversation happen over time in order to make it a safe place to share really risky questions and reflections.

4. Teachers in a Healthy Network Develop Effective Styles of Leadership.

> "There's a lot of experience in this room." Terry smiles, opening her slender arms and hands. "I will be willing to share what I've done, what I've learned from my mistakes, what I plan to do. There are twenty-seven fine teachers here, and we ought to look to one another" (Sunstein, 1994, p. 61).

Certainly David and I, as co-directors, provided some of the project leadership and were richly rewarded for it not only throughout the experiences and learning, but also through the frequent and generous praise of our colleagues. As the participation charts in Appendix D reflect, we were the most prolific contributors to the listserv. However, unlike classroom discourse as Cazden (1998) observes where a teacher's voice silences students, in a virtual environment, the time for our conversations was not limited in the same way. The result in 1996-97 was, for instance, that the five months of my greatest number of contributions, elicited the greatest number of contributions by teachers. In a

reflection Debbie (Kinder, 1998) noted that teachers always knew I was "listening," and they may have relied on a response to validate that perception. However, in an interesting evolution of the conversation, one will note, as previously mentioned, that in this most recent year (1997-98) the contributions of two teachers are similar to those of the project co-directors (see Kinder and Steffen).

In her reflection on the nature of K-12/university collaborations, Colleen, as noted earlier, had referred to the "shield" of the university. In early 1996, two teachers in Wisconsin were battling local principals who didn't wish students to use writing to voice dissatisfaction with school policies or procedures. Project co-director, David Schaafsma met with one of the principals. Subsequently, Sarah (Robbins, 4/2/96) noted:

> I am very proud of the way you have been an advocate for Laura--as you always are for teachers. More and more I am convinced that part of our job must be to participate in savvy ways in public discourse about education. When we don't we shy away from a difficult talk that isn't fun but we neglect something others can't always do. I find it hard and discouraging at times. I am glad to learn from your example.

Several times in conversations on the value of forming a K-12/university collaboration, K-12 teachers voiced their perception that university participants had "power" that they

did not and provided a "shield" in teachers' own buildings for the work they were doing.

Project leadership, however, was largely diffused across those participating in the project and on the listserv. Participants distinguished themselves as leaders through their print and conference presentations, their ability to share illustrative classroom stories and experiences which others found meaningful, their ability to listen effectively and respond appropriately to the stories, experiences and questions of others and their ability to relate relevant non-project-generated learning, experiences and resources to project work.

The fluctuating nature of leadership is illustrated in Debbie's closing reflection on the listserv, in response to the question, "Can you give any examples of ways in which the listserv conversation has influenced your understandings about teachers, students, teaching, learning, classrooms, community?" Debbie (Kinder, 1998) noted:

> The best example just happened. I asked for support when my principal canceled my reading workshop. Lots of people offered support which strengthened me to resist his directives. Kevin's message gave me ideas for a parent letter which convinced my principal to change his mind.

When examining the Write for Your Life Project—particularly though the project's log reports—a question about project leadership comes to mind: Who was leading the WFYL Project? One way to answer the question is in the form of another question: Who influenced the shape of the project and the practice of others? The answer appears to be: Everyone—at one time or another. In a closing reflection on the value of the listserv, Joye (Alberts, 1998) made this observation about the way the contributions of others had influenced her teaching:

> I am in awe of the teachers whose words I read and feel privileged to learn from them. I particularly use resources mentioned on the listserv either as part of my work with composition students or to read for myself. I take suggestions for adolescent literature and pass them on to my colleague Gretchen who teaches adolescent lit and to Abby [her daughter] who is a reader of adolescent lit.

5. Teachers in a Healthy Network Culture Respond to External Pressures in Ways that Serve to Further Establish the Bonds between Group Members.

> "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes"
>
> I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the mailman says, Here's your mail. Here's your mail he said.
>
> I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, "And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked."
>
> I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong.

> We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.
>
> I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.
>
> One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away.
>
> Friends and neighbors will say. What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?
>
> They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (Cisneros, 1995, pp. 133-134)

Will the WFYL network dissolve? If so, does that constitute its failure? Will it "go away" in order to re-invent itself and then come back for those teachers who cannot network beyond their local sites? Brian Lord of the Educational Development Company suggests:

> It was said early on in networks' lives that they were fragile and I protested. They're not fragile. They're quite resilient. They change shape to accommodate the political shifts, as well as the contextual shifts, in teaching and learning. (in Richardson, 1996, p. 35)

and, Judith Warren Little concurs, "If groups start and disband, we see it as failure, but we could see it as flexibility" (in Richardson, 1996, p. 35).

And McLaughlin and Darling-Hammond suggest that teacher networks are so successful *because* of their fluidity, that

they should be encouraged to "come and go, to change and evolve" as they become just one more molecule in the humus that nurtures growth, the organic materials that nurture activities such as seminars, meetings, and workshops.

Write for Your Life was originally funded for two years (1993-94 and 1994-95), but it has survived for five by attempting to manage money prudently and requesting yearly an opportunity to "rollover" remaining funds. Richardson notes that funding issues can serve to solidify or destroy networks. "Networks . . . have had some trouble sustaining themselves once foundation or other private support is gone" (1996, p. 35).

The first year we requested a "rollover," we enlarged the number of states involved in the network to five; preparing for a second rollover request, we enlarged again to ten states. Undoubtedly, the necessity of requesting funding pushed us to enlarge the network faster than we might have without the felt need to do so. The teachers' praise of one another is testimony to the value of having done so. To prepare for the rollover requests, we often used the listserv to call for and process the data that would be used. Such occasions provided every participant with an opportunity to think about not only what they were currently doing, but also

about the unique features of where they were working, how they were working, and how they might be working in the future. For instance, I (Swenson, 2/1/96) drafted a listserv message to project participants asking for their assistance in creating a collaboratively written grant proposal both to convince the Bingham Trust to allow us to continue to use remaining grant dollars and to initiate the search for a new project funder. Specifically, the invitation read:

> The grant proposal will begin with a description of the current sites. We would like you to write the description of your site in 3 pages following this common structure:
>
> Page 1: Demographics and Pictures: Please create a page that helps the reader literally "see" what's going on—some shots of university facilitator, classroom teacher(s) and students at work. On this same page, interspersed with the pictures, please demographically describe your site: Geographic location, ethnicity of students, socio-economics of students/communities, local literacy rates, whatever you feel is appropriate to help a reader come to "know" your context.
>
> Pages 2-3: Please address these 3 questions: 1) Why is the Write for Your Life project important to your students, school, district, community? 2) How can you envision the project evolving over the next 3 years? That is, how can you see it becoming increasingly beneficial for your students/school/district/community? 3) How can you see the project becoming institutionalized after three more years of funding?
>
> Optional pages: Letters of support from anyone and everyone at your site: your principal, parents, school board members, mayor, department chairperson (school and university), provost/chancellor/president . . . the milk wo/man!

We continued to workshop the invitation, the writing, the deadline and the purpose in the e-mail conversation. In the process, we shared valuable information about the constraints and opportunities inherent in our work at each site. Working together, sites contributed a collaboratively written report. Similar to the grant proposals that they invite their students to write, teachers needed to research their local communities in order to describe their project sites including its demographic character. Margo Seaman and Tony (Tendero, 1996), wrote of their site in New York City:

> The large majority of the students are from single parent or guardian-situation homes. The effects of violence and drugs are evident in the neighborhood. Ninety-nine percent of the students participate in the Free Lunch Program.

In a different vein, Debbie (Kinder, 1996) in rural Platteville, Wisconsin, began:

> On February 8, 1996, the community's second largest employer, Advanced Transformer announced the closing of their plant. Over a 12 to 18-month period, 560 jobs will be phased out. Currently, one in seven families are living below the poverty level in our area.

In more affluent Janesville, Wisconsin, Laura (Vander Ploeg, 1996) wrote:

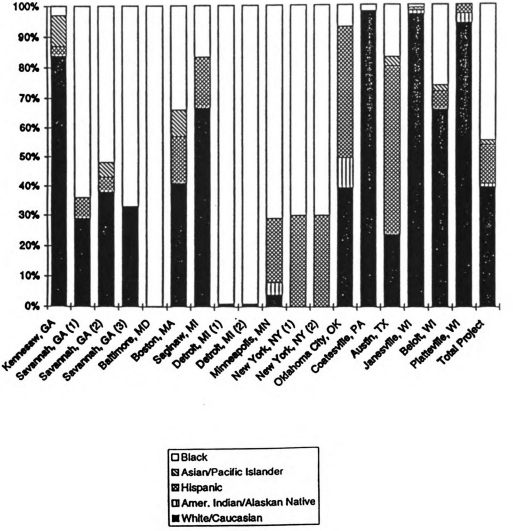
> The ethnic makeup of the city is predominantly white, with a small but growing African American and Southeast Asian population. The Rock River divides Janesville into two distinct sections and creates a

symbolic separation between the wealthier East Side and the less-privileged West Side.

The next two questions required participants to think both about the work in which they were currently engaged, how it "mattered" to their students, and how they could imagine the work continuing to play out in their site in the foreseeable future.

A later grant initiative led us to invite teachers to post on the listserv demographic descriptions of their classrooms. By posting their reports (see Figure 1), teachers across sites were able to see the diversity of the sites in the project.

Figure 2:
Demographic Profile of Students in the Write for Your Life Project, 1997



Imagining a more decentralized future for the project—one in which networks might be intrastate rather than interstate when the project funding was almost been depleted--I invited teachers to think with me about how we might move WFYL into other classrooms during the last few months that funds would be available. This conversation prompted the network to think about how to "broadcast" the project and allowed us to ask: What had drawn us and kept us together?

Why teach this way when it would be so much easier to be a more traditional teacher? How would we talk to others about this project?

Aware that project funding would expire in less than six months, I (Swenson, 10/7/97) invited teachers on the listserv to help me think about how we might "Spread the WFYL 'Gospel,'" joking because we were never singing from exactly the same page in the "hymnal":

> <u>Spreading the WFYL "Gospel"</u>
>
> Gosh, did that get your attention—"gospel"—did we EVER think there was a "gospel" to WFYL (I imagine Kevin in absolute hysterics here since I think he thinks we're just a tad "loosely constructed."). No, but really…
>
> As I continue to read . . . about teacher networks that have "taken hold"—those which teachers have named as generative sites for their professional development—there are a number of similar characteristics—which I'll feed here over time, but starting with "a shared 'problem."
>
> Seems to me that you all are either trying to make David and me feel good by saying WFYL has been good for you, or we really have had some unique opportunities from this project . . . Here's what I think: I think

every one of you is scared silly about the threats to children in America. I think you bonded partially out of fear—wherever I teach, whatever grade level, whatever students, these kids are "at risk" because almost (?) all American kids are at risk. We haven't created an environment conducive to their flourishing. So we're committed to trying to do something—to have conversations with other teachers—across settings, across grade levels, across race and ethnicity, to ask important questions of one another: How do you engage your students in their own learning? How do you use the excuse of "schooling" to produce opportunities for kids to figure out how to construct a healthy/healthier environment for themselves? How can literacy support their quests to sustain their lives—physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually?

So . . . the network kept growing and the conversation kept going because there are no easy answers—no universal answers. We each keep trying to help create a classroom here and a classroom there that are oases for kids. . . .

Kevin (LaPlante, 10/8/97) responded:

Well said, Janet. I think you hit it on the head when you mentioned how almost every child in America is "at risk." Considering that WFYL's mission was to tackle the health issues in young people's lives that put them at risk, the clarity in such irony might be why the "gospel" is so brilliant. I can't believe I mentioned that word without going into my altar boy withdrawal. Yes, I was an altar boy. I even knew the mass in Latin.

Audrey (Appelsies,10/8/97) revised my understanding of teacher motivation:

Janet, this may sound picky, I agree with most of what you said except I do what I do with inner city kids because I care about them, I hope that the work that we all do will make for a better future. I like to be with kids, I like to hear what they think, and I think I have a neat perspective on life because of kids. Yes, sure sometimes I get scared or afraid, but that does not

> motivate me. Positive things motivate me, and fear cripples me.
>
> Like I said, this may be picky, but is "fear" the best word for all this?

To which I (Swenson 10/10/97) responded:

> I like Audrey's prompting that "fear" about what might happen to the children in our classrooms is probably not the best choice of words to describe what keeps some teacher motivated about continuing to engage in "best practices" in general and focus on health-related writing in particular.
>
> How would some of you respond to what keeps you motivated to think about and do the things you consider to be related to WFYL? You could be teaching in an easier way—working your way sequentially through some book—read, write answers to the questions at the end. Why do you do this [WFYL] since it's so much harder.
>
> . . . .

And Debbie (Kinder, 10/10/97) considered the alternative to the type of teaching in which WFYL had engaged her:

> The hard teaching, which I've tried and hate, is doing stuff which I don't believe in and the kids hate. There is no tougher duty than dragging myself through a day of someone else's useless curriculum. When the students and I find and take off on a topic which matters to us, the excitement is worth all the risks I take with safety in the classroom and my safety in the district.
>
> The reason I love teaching is for the ah-ha moments which happen when we're using language and literacy to do something important. After fighting a losing battle to change the school policy about open campus at lunchtime, one of my students said that it had been worth the struggle. He said, "How many students in this school can say they did something that mattered in their English class?" So, that's the goal. Find what matters and work on it using the tools of language and classroom community. This way the students see the tools as a means to an end, rather than irrelevant top-down curriculum.

> For me there is no going back. The question instead is how fast can my students and I move forward using increasingly student-centered activities? I can only do it with the inspiration I take from you folks and my kids and Janet's kind and generous leadership. Please note that this is being written on a Friday night! I'm a Believer.

Andy (Fishman, 10/14/97) expanded on Debbie's notion:

> As to why WFYL instead of an easier way: I do care about (if not fear) what will happen to our kids and our society, but there's a less apparently altruistic reason too. Teaching the old way felt bad. It felt inauthentic to the point that I not only wasn't being me in the classroom: I was being someone I didn't know and didn't like very much. I may appear to be speaking out of turn (hypersensitivity again?) because I'm not a WFYL classroom teacher, but WFYL values and approaches are what drew me to the project because they reflect those I held and used as a HS teacher and now as an English Ed freshman comp/Writing Project person. Make sense?

Funding wasn't the only issue that invited us to reflect on our work. Project evaluation was another. In thinking about whether networks offer the "perfect" solution to teacher professional development, Lieberman and McLaughlin note:

> . . . the quality of the experiences provided by networks varies. Teachers aren't always able to transfer what they have learned to their own classrooms. And the work of some networks has not been evaluated enough, perhaps because such oversight destroys the sense of trust and support that the networks are built on. Without procedures for ongoing outside review, networks can fall prey to the myopia of unfamiliar practices and the misdirection of unchallenged assumptions." (in Richardson, 1996, p. 31)

Periodically, we put out calls on the listserv, inviting teachers to tell us whether they "knew" if the project was

working and how they knew. Responses indicated that in a Detroit classroom and in various Georgia classrooms students scored substantially higher on the state-wide writing tests than other students. In the Detroit case, they scored 30% higher than other city students and 8% higher than the state average. In New York City, reading test scores were raised dramatically (Tendero, 5/9/97): "Only 1 out of 33 students was below the standard. The goal for the class/school was 60% [above the standard.]").

There were also reports of other-than-test-score measures of success—such as the following invitation from Alan to his students to think about the way that the work they were doing in class addressed the IRA/NCTE standards. Alan (Shinaver, 1/21/97) posted several of the students' remarks on the listserv:

> In this essay we are supposed to write about the skills we have learned, and not learned, through our Peer Mediation Program. Looking over the requirements, I see that we have met quite a few of these standards.
>
> To begin with, under the heading of what a literate individual should know, I see that we have learned quite a few of those points. But, one point that really stands out for me is the last statement. It states, "A literate individual uses the content and process of English language arts to develop…persistence, flexibility, curiosity . . . in this class we have had to learn to be patient and flexible when we are peer mediators. We as a class have also had to use these skills when we have dealt with professional people in the community. Everyone's schedules are different,

everyone has their own ideas, and everyone has their own questions. So we need to learn to ask questions, be persistent when we do projects, and always be ready and willing when changes arise.

Another standard I know this class has met is the idea that we need to be effective speakers. Any of us who have gone to Parent Advisory meetings, or have just gone to community meetings, are encouraged to voice our opinions on how we feel this class has and will benefit our lives.

Personally I have spoken with some in our community. Being the shy person that I am, it is difficult for me to speak up, but Mr. Shinaver encourages all of us to speak our minds. He teaches us that if we really enjoy being a part of his class and a part of the program, we really need to show community leaders and citizens what a loss his school and surrounding schools would have if it were taken away, or not taken seriously.

In this class we deal with topics that are very emotional, and very deep. When mediations occur, the students are encouraged to speak their feelings and motivations. The mediators always try to lend a listening ear and to understand a person's point of view.

One important lesson we are taught is that we should not judge others, and we should not take sides, because of our own background and beliefs. Mr. Shinaver tells us that what we feel about certain issues that come up doesn't make a different in mediations. We need to see that however little or big the problem is in our eyes, it is something important to that individual.

Peer mediations are all about finding out the problem, what the motivations were behind the problems, and trying to guide the students to think of solutions that both parties can agree on.

A skill that is very stressed upon in English class is our ability to be effective writers. All of us in this class have had the opportunity to write for purposeful information.

Every day at the start of class there is a student designated to take log or notes. This person then listens to activities planned and projects that need to be fulfilled and writes these down. Any and all information, discussions, and problems we have in class are all written down, Mr. Shinaver tells us to write

down key facts, dates, times and etc. that we may need for later reference. The notes are then copied and distributed to the students for personal reference. Although these papers are important, we try to put in our own marks by drawing, statements and messages to other mediators—all unique and creative.

Whenever a paper like this is written, we bring it to our teacher and also our classmates to get needed input on how to make it more informative and effective.

Although his class is not your everyday open your notebooks and do page 106 class, we are learning valuable lessons.

This class does not have a teacher's "how-to." It does not come with books or even lesson plans, but Mr. Shinaver does his best at seeing the requirements we need for English and then trying to incorporate what he can into the assignments.

Through this class, we have learned how to write grants, prepare skits, and how to communicate to business people. We have learned the value of persistence, patience and most of all cooperation.

We have all gone through so many experiences and setbacks through this class that I think the majority of us won't take no for an answer. If we want a project accomplished, we find resources, we look for information, and we work together.

This is not your normal English class, but this class if very important to me. We, as students, need this class.

External pressures on the network weren't always as "benign" as the challenge of beguiling a funder or interpreting measures of "success." As noted earlier, some teachers experienced less than hospitable settings for their work. Colleen (Fairbanks, 1998) alluded to this in her closing reflection on the role of the listserv:

> It has been a useful tool to glimpse other classrooms and settings, to share experiences, and to interpret/investigate issues specific to the project. I also believe it has been an important source of support

for teachers like Audrey, Debbie and Laura who often feel "out on a limb" and alone.

WFYL listserv participants used the site of the conversations on the listserv to forge strong connections with one another—on personal and professional levels. As Kevin (LaPlante, 1998) summarized it in his written reflection on the listserv, "We were there for each other." We created common ground through dialogue. We nurtured and supported one another's commitment to the purposes of our project and to our network itself. We worked collaboratively to identify a flexible form of leadership that acknowledged the expertise each network participant brought to the project. Finally, we turned outside pressures from other educators into searches for funding into invitations to think about teaching and learning in our own and one another's classrooms. Whether we used the word "healthy" to describe the WFYL network or another metaphor—strong pipelines laid between participants; fertile humus tilled by many hands; a safety net for tightrope walkers—bonds were established in the WFYL network that allowed us to offer ourselves and one another "authentic" professional development opportunities.

As we turn our attention to the ways in which the English language arts teachers who were part of the WFYL

project used the occasion of listserv conversations to teach and learn from one another, it is important to emphasize again that these "teachable moments" for colleagues occurred in a context in which they clearly established mutual feelings of investment, trust, engagement and solidarity. Perhaps they could have taught and learned from one another in a different type of culture, but I would argue that the characteristics of this particular culture had positive implications for the ways in which they responded to the learning opportunities they created on-line for themselves and for one another. Should we, as English educators, wish to replicate such opportunities for others of our colleagues, we cannot ignore the implications of context for the professional development of practicing teachers.

Notes

[1]When I first introduce WFYL teachers, I provide each teacher's full name, the grade levels at which he or she teaches, the subject(s) each teaches, and the location of each teacher's workplace. Thereafter, I identify each teacher by his or her first name only. Appendix A contains a roster of teachers for the reader's information.

[2]Throughout this dissertation, I have corrected typographical errors in teachers' listserv postings.

THE WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE PROJECT

VOLUME II

By

Janet A. Swenson

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CHAPTER FOUR

Professional Development Opportunities on the WFYL Network Listserv

An emerging body of professional development literature reveals that many educators, including English educators, are interested in how teachers, once prepared, continue to develop as professionals. When I use the term "professional development" here I am not referring to efforts on the part of someone(s) to teach or train teachers—to impart information or methods. Instead, I use "professional development" to refer to the ways in which practicing professional educators who already possess a "tacit knowledge base" continue to engage in critical inquiry into their understandings and practices, the ways in which teachers become "reflective practitioners" (Schon 1983; 1987), the ways in which teachers' experiences allow them to reach deeper understandings of their philosophies of education and theories that guide their practice as well as their practice itself.

Not everyone shares my understanding of "professional development," however, as Chris Clark (1992) notes in "Teachers as Designers in Self-directed Professional Development":

> In some quarters the phrase "professional development of teachers" carries a great deal of negative undertones. It implies a process done to teachers: that teachers need to be forced into developing; that teachers have deficits in knowledge and skill that can be fixed by training; and that teachers are pretty much alike. Now, as a teacher, how eager would you feel about co-operating in a process in which you are presumed to be passive, resistant, deficient, and one of a faceless, homogeneous herd? (p.75)

To be sure, there exists a range of ways in which English language arts teachers and their colleagues are able to develop their teaching practice once they are "in service," ranging from occasions in which teachers are required to participate in professional development activities that others have designed and decided will be useful to them to self-sponsored professional development activities. Beyond the school building, for instance, teachers may choose to enroll in graduate coursework and attend local, state, and national conventions, conferences, institutes and workshops. Within school buildings or districts, they may be required or elect to attend workshops, staff meetings, and "team planning" sessions. Teachers also engage in self-sponsored, self-directed reading programs, and some of the most widely-acclaimed in-service teacher development opportunities have included individual teacher's research projects and projects conducted by teacher networks at the school, district, state, and national levels.

Most states require teachers—after they begin their practice—to continue to learn by enrolling their subject matter and their craft in graduate course offerings. Some specify the number of credits that teachers must take; others, particular courses. Unfortunately, there is not a body of research that demonstrates whether required credits or coursework—a kind of professional development that is often referred to as "outside-in"—proves equally beneficial to all teachers.

Beyond meeting licensure requirements, some teachers engage in graduate course work by enrolling in graduate degree programs. Teachers often enter advanced degree programs for two different reasons: to continue their studies and/or to qualify for salary increases. In their coursework, teachers typically study materials that university faculty believe will broaden or deepen their disciplinary knowledge and their practice. While study within their teaching disciplines sometimes is designed to make teachers more familiar with the range of resources for themselves and their students, Sharon Robinson from the U.S. Department of Education reports:

> Research shows that more exposure to discipline knowledge results in didactic teaching because that's the way the disciplines are taught. We need to look at

> a pedagogy around content and teaching for understanding (in Lewis, 1997, p. 2).

Although school budgets and the availability of substitute teachers have constrained teachers' participation in local, state and national conferences, conventions, workshops and institutes, these events also offer teachers opportunities to learn from colleagues about issues of shared concern. Unfortunately, since they seldom offer follow-up consultations, these "one-shot" efforts at professional development frequently don't meet the teachers' needs when they are attempting to look critically at their own practice or when they experience the inevitable problems that come when trying to change practice.

In addition to these "outside" initiatives and opportunities for teachers' professional development opportunities--licensing requirements; graduate course work; conventions, conferences, institutes and workshops—offered within schools and school districts. Hargreaves and Fullan note that

> . . . skills training in the development of teachers has become big business. It is the prime focus of staff development efforts and the major consumer of staff development budgets. When we evaluate skills-based approaches to teacher development, we are not therefore evaluating just one of many equally available and widespread approaches. We are evaluating the overwhelmingly dominant approach to planned teacher development activity in modern school systems (1992, 2).

Although teachers may choose on an individual basis whether to participate in "outside" professional development activities, almost all school districts mandate teacher participation in school-sponsored professional development activities, including workshops, staff meetings and team planning. Furthermore, as concern about school reform has increased, many school districts have increased the number and duration of required activities of this kind. Hargreaves and Fullan observe: "Knowledge and skills-based approaches to teacher development are also favored by administrators since they are clearly focused, easily organized and packaged, and relatively self-contained . . . " (3). Unfortunately, teachers' disdain for decontextualized workshops, skills sessions, and staff development work is well documented (see, for example Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Little, 1987).

Anne Lewis notes that it is not just school- or district-sponsored professional development activities that often prove counter-productive for teachers:

> We know what's wrong with professional development—using good teachers in ways that discourage reflection, sharing or the building of a professional learning community. The failure of what has served as professional development for several decades is well documented. It rewards teachers for coursework that is

> often unrelated to the classroom or only results in moving them into administration. It tends to reinforce practice rather than change it, and it is so unchallenging that teachers put little stock in it (1997, p. 1).

In a synthesis of findings that testify to the use of what are generally regarded as outdated methods of professional development, Judith Warren Little (1995) notes:

> Local patterns of resource allocation tend to favor the training model over alternatives. The investment in packaged programs tends to consume all or most of the available resources (in Miller, 1995, p. 2).

Edward Miller draws particular attention to the research of Barbara Miller, Brian Lord and Judith Dorney (1994) who conducted a study of staff development in four large urban districts in 1994. In this study the researchers found that

> the traditional model—short-term passive activities with limited follow-up—was still common, even though teachers generally found such training boring and irrelevant. Many teachers were angry about being "subjected" to inappropriate, unfocused, or ill-conceived activities. They noted that the kind of teaching they saw at such workshops would be unacceptable in a classroom of children (1995, p. 2).

It is not surprising that as we developed richer understandings of how students learn, we have also developed richer understandings of what constitutes "authentic" professional development opportunities for teachers. In literature about the subject, teachers are being encouraged increasingly to develop their practice by conducting teacher

research projects within their own classrooms. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle explain one powerful reason why:

> Because teacher research interrupts traditional assumptions about knowers, knowing, and what can be known about teaching, it has the potential to redefine the notion of a knowledge base for teaching and to challenge the university's hegemony in the generation of expert knowledge for the field. Because teacher research challenges the dominant views of staff development and pre-service training as transmission and implementation of knowledge from outside to inside schools, it has the potential to reconstruct teachers' development across the professional life span so that inquiry and reform are intrinsic to teaching (1993, xiv).

And, although it is far from customary, the promising potential of teacher research as a method of professional development is becoming increasingly visible. On an individual basis and in small groups, teachers—many of them teachers of the English language arts—are not only interrogating their practice as it unfolds and making adjustments to their practice based upon their classroom-based research, but they are also publishing the fruits of their labors. Evidence of the professional development of these teachers is being documented in growing numbers of published teaching biographies, autobiographies, journals and narratives teachers are composing and reviewing in order to validate, contradict, and extend their own experiences.[1]

Evidence on the WFYL listserv indicates that often, as reflective practitioners engage in self-sponsored professional development, they also read and study professional literature that is often assigned in degree graduate school courses and degree programs, literature that provides pedagogical[2], theoretical/philosophical[3], curricular[4], socio-cultural[5] and technological[6] "lenses" through which they may reflect on their practice. (The texts I cite as examples of this professional reading are ones that WFYL project participants named for one another on the project listserv.)

However promising the practices of self-initiated reading, reflection and classroom-based research are, however, research in teacher education suggests that practitioners need also to enrich the understandings they gain as they reflect on their practice individually by sharing their developing understandings with colleagues who are "critical friends," or members of a network. Although teacher networks are still a fairly new locus for the professional development of teachers (estimates are that a few hundred exist nationwide) and network listserv conversations that support those networks are newer still, consensus exists in the literature about the importance of

research networks—including, recently, those "virtual" networks emerging in electronic mail conversations—for teachers' professional development.[7]

Speaking of such communities, Cochran-Smith and Lytle observe:

> . . . in a Vygotskyan sense, the voices of others become integrated in one's own. . . . There are unsettling differences between the stance of outsider and insider, of participant observer and observer participant (1993, ix),

and they go on to claim that such points of tension contain enormous potential for individual and collaborative growth.

The WFYL project listserv engaged participants in teacher research in their classrooms and with other members of the project network on-line. As I reflected on the printed log reports of our on-line conversations, I wondered if I would find evidence of generally agreed upon characteristics of "authentic" professional development like these published by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (1993):

- Professional development should offer meaningful intellectual, social, and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials, and with colleagues both in and out of teaching.
- Professional development should take explicit account of the contexts of teaching and the experience of teachers.
- Professional development should offer support for informed dissent.

- Professional development should place classroom practice in the larger contexts of school practice and the educational careers of children.
- Professional development should prepare teachers (and students and parents) to use the techniques and perspectives of inquiry.
- Professional development should balance support for institutional initiatives with support for those initiated by teachers individually and collectively (pp. 158-159).

Or of these that Darling-Hammond (1998) argues are necessary for effective professional development:

- directly connected to content areas
- organized around real problems of practice instead of abstractions
- continuous and ongoing
- able to provide teachers with access to outside resources and expertise
- housed within a team or network.

Or of these that Lieberman and Miller (1992) outline after observing the qualities of effective professional development that support teacher inquiry in professional practice schools:

- Colleagueship, openness and trust
- Opportunities and time for disciplined inquiry
- Teacher learning of content in context
- Reconstruction of leadership roles
- [Support for] Networks, collaborations and coalitions. (pp. 162-176)

Or these that the National Council of English Conference on English Education (1994) names in a professional development "Bill of Rights" for English language arts teachers:

- Reflective Practice: Teachers engage in action and reflection, thus affirming that learning is the key to better teaching. . .
- Ownership: . . . Teachers have the prerogative to change or not change their practices in light of what occurs in inservice education . . .
- Theorized Practice: . . . Inservice education respects teachers practice while it uncovers the theoretical assumptions underlying them . . .
- Collaboration: . . . [Professional development] inspires and maintains an environment in which all who participate work together to investigate issues and questions they have identified as important.
- Agency: . . . If teachers are to take and retain responsibility for their own learning, they need to take an active role in deciding (1) what to explore in order to grow professionally and (2) how to conduct those explorations . . .
- Sufficient time: For any learner, significant learning requires time. Change is a process, not an event . . . This is a recursive process: problems are identified, tentative solutions are considered, and then more questions arise . . .
- Administrative Collaboration: Because in a constructive classroom environment, teachers and children constitute a community of learners, in a constructive working environment, teachers and administrators constitute a community of committed educational professionals . . .
- School-Community Partnerships: . . . Activities which encourage teachers to affirm the genuine and diverse concerns of parents for the education of their children can create and/or reinforce parents' involvement and interest in education . . .
- Pluralism and Democracy: Inservice education respects the cultural diversity of a school's community context and takes into account the needs and concerns of members of those cultures . . .
- Explicit and Tangible Support: . . . Because through inservice education teachers are more likely to grow professionally, such participation must be recognized and supported. . . . (pp. 125-128)

After reading the WFYL listserv conversation in the light of these similarly stated characteristics of authentic

professional development, I would argue that in their sustained electronic dialogue the network of WFYL teachers did construct authentic professional development for themselves and one another as they did the following things:

1. Articulated their needs and goals for their students and themselves,

2. Offered resources and responses for the expressed and unexpressed needs of others,

3. Evaluated resources and sources of information they were using,

4. Expressed and validated the professionalism, exemplary work, and instructional leadership of others,

5. Reflected on and critically reviewed project work through the development of publication opportunities,

6. Reflected on and examined their own teaching and learning, moved away from less-productive practices and toward a principled practice in which they searched for theoretical bases for their teaching,

7. Gathered data and used a variety of formats to learn—surveys, shared student work, creative writing, etc.,

8. Engaged in collaborative problem solving,

9. Engaged in informed dissent with network members,

10. Learned in depth about important issues including educational reform issues as they affect particular schools, students, and contexts.

1. Articulating their needs and goals for their students and themselves

In Chapter Four, I demonstrated that teachers regularly articulated project objectives and the value of the WFYL network for ourselves and our students. Here, I would note that articulations of these project objectives also served as opportunities for teacher to name, define, conceptualize, and interrogate their broad goals for their students: leading healthier lives, developing effective literacy, and making school meaningful.

Imbedded in those broad goals were other goals and purposes, teachers' individual goals and purposes that surfaced in their daily dialogues with one another. To illustrate a number of those goals and purposes, I will focus here on the way Audrey used the listserv during her first year in the project, which was her second year of teaching.

Audrey was explicit about using the listserv to meet her needs. For instance, during an on-going dialogue with Laura in Wisconsin, she (Appelsies, 1/15/96) wrote: "Laura, Hi. I sure do wish your could check you e-mail more often. Then again, perhaps once a week is healthy. I'm quite addicted to this thing." and to meet her (Appelsies, 1/24/96) students needs: "Basically, I want my kids to realize they are not

the only ones doing this. It may add energy to their search . . . ."

Audrey used the listserv dialogue to extend her practice and understanding by exploring the classroom practices of other teachers, articulating examples of her own practice for others to discuss, requesting resources and responses from others, expressing interest in the national professional conversation on teaching, helping to frame face-to-face professional development opportunities, and using the listserv to speculate on areas of her practice that perplexed her.

When teachers in Beloit and Platteville extolled the virtues of involving WFYL students in penpal exchanges, Audrey (Appelsies, 1/19/96) pressed them to explain this strategy further: "What a thrilling day for you [when the two groups of students met]. What were their letters mostly about? Did the enthusiasm for writing them change as the kids got to know each other a little?"

Similarly, when a Savannah teacher explained how she was working with another school to engage elementary and middle school students in researching and addressing the "threats" students felt when they changed schools, Audrey (Appelsies, 2/6/96) requested additional information: "I really like

your students' idea of helping [elementary students make] the transition to middle school. Our kids struggle too. What are they doing now with it? Let me know how things are going."

When the same Savannah teacher asked others whether they found it more advantageous for students to conduct group or individual research projects, Audrey (Appelsies, 2/6/96) used the listserv to share her practice:

> . . . [my students] are writing informal research papers on the issue they are most concerned about. Part of the 6th grade curriculum is a research paper. After they identified an issue, they are required to informally find out more about it—by talking to others, reading magazine articles, newspapers, etc. In the next week I will ask them to think about how they might teach others about their issue or how they could make a change in their community regarding their issue. I hope to bring some groups together so they can work on a few community based issues/projects . . . .

Reminding her colleagues, "I'd love ideas," Audrey used the listserv to seek resources and models for her students' work after they named the following issues for study (Appelsies, 1/18/96):

> Death: Why do people we love have to die? What will happen to me when I die?
>
> Sex: Why do teens want to have it? Am I too young to be doing it?
>
> Future: How will I achieve my dreams? What career will I choose?
>
> Homelessness: Why and how does it happen? Isn't there family that can help? Have they ever had a "real" life?
>
> Gangs/Violence/Drugs/Tagging: Why?

Life: What is it?

Grades: Why is 69 not passing? How can I get good grades? Why did I flunk 6th grade, not pass a class?

Choices/Friends: How can I make good choices? Why do friends use you?

Following a description of the service learning projects that her students had defined, including creation of a children's book on effective decision making and a dramatic performance on "feelings count," Audrey (Appelsies, 4/15/96) issued a broad invitation to others to provide insights: "One other thing . . . any suggestions that come to mind after reading my brief sketches of the service learning projects? Let me know."

Another use Audrey made of the listserv was to indicate her desire to enter the national conversation on teaching and learning. When I invited project teachers to consider writing collaboratively and submitting pieces to *Voices from the Middle*, Audrey (Appelsies, 4/15/96) responded: "I'm game. Let's brainstorm. I've never done this before. Anyone have any suggestion on how to start?" Responding to some questions I posed as starting places, Audrey (Appelsies, 4/17/96) continued to think about writing for publication: "Thanks for the questions, now my mind is cookin': Laura, what do you think [about collaborating]? What was the planning like for you and your students [for the videos we

exchanged]?" Later, when I invited project participants to develop a proposal on-line to present at the 1996 NCTE/DOD/NWP "Global Conversations" conference in Heidelberg, Audrey joined in.

Audrey also used the listserv to help orchestrate face-to-face professional development opportunities she would find meaningful. As our regularly scheduled meeting approached, she (Appelsies, 2/19/96) named what she wanted to experience: ". . . In Boston, I would like to hear updates from all of our sites, I want to know about the future of WFYL, and I would love help writing, or at least advice about how to write for publication. . . .

In a number of postings like the following ones, she used the listserv conversation to explore calls for educational reform:

> . . . I want a valuable discussion after the [state mandated] writing assessment [like one a Marietta teacher shared]. I could only wish for a carryover like that [from project work to the mandated assessment]. It says a lot about the project. What topics are coming up [as students reflect on how participation in WFYL prepared them for the test]? (Appelsies, 1/30/96)
>
> One issue I am concerned about is why this "type" of teaching is so controversial. Why do Laura and Debbie have to defend themselves to administrators? Why do my lesson plans come back to me with a note from the department head, "After your project is through, we need to meet to plan how your students can do more TAAS writing" (TAAS is the standardized test, it only really counts in 8th grade)? I don't feel like this project

> will ever be through! It's not a unit of study, but a way of teaching. Who understands me? (Appelsies, 2/19/96)

> . . . Reading your [Laura's] questions and frustrations [regarding whether improved literacy actually does or even could equate to greater power for students] is hard. I really do understand. Colleen and I are trying to put together an article and the thing that keeps coming back to me is how seriously I take the kids (what they have to say and write, and how they view the world). I sense you do too. I guess we all do. When others shrug it off, it seems they do not feel the importance of what we are doing and the kinds of messages we give to kids when we brush off what really matters to them. . . . (Appelsies, 3/16/96)

Finally, Audrey (Appelsies, 4/15/96) used the listserv conversation and her network connections to ask for assistance in finding a new teaching position and to say that the conversation with others had not only benefited her professional development, but also led her to want to continue to participate in them:

> . . . does anyone out there know anyone up there [in Minneapolis]??? Pull out the big strings, guys, because I need a job. I hope to work in an inner city school, upper El (4-6). And, as long as I'm asking, any hope of me establishing a site for WFYL there?

During the first six months in which she participated in the project, Audrey used the listserv conversation to fulfill her own purposes and to address her own goals. During her second and third years in the project, she wrote with increasing self-assurance about issues she raised more

tentatively the first year that she participated in the project.

2. Offering resources and responses for the expressed purposes of others

Teachers found two challenges inherent in WFYL participation: for many developing a class in which the curriculum was inquiry-based and dialogically created with students was a new practice and supporting student inquiries focused on issues of adolescent health and well-being also was new. As they initiated these new practices and focused on these new areas of inquiry, teachers turned to one another for support. One of the methods they used to gain further insight was simply to ask one another direct questions, to solicit information. Audrey (Appelsies, 9/5/96), for instance, requested that Toby teach her how to initiate the "Traveling Parent Journal":

> Toby——!!!!
> You did it [joined the listserv]. Congrats. I'm so glad to have you on-line. Please tell me again about the parent journal. How did you start it? What did you expect from the parents? How did you keep it going? I really want to do it this year. 41 kids?
> Hope you had a great summer.

Toby (Curry, 9/7/96) responded:

> The way I do my parent journal is this: First, I get a sturdy notebook and label it "Parent Journal Room 213." Next, I write the first entry, introducing myself as a mom and a teacher, explaining to parents that this can be a place where we can talk about kids, school,

parenting or anything else that someone has a concern or question about. Next, I get a student to volunteer to be the parent journal organizer. I give them a calendar to write on for the school year, and they keep track of which kids have taken the journal home, that way we keep it rotating on a pretty regular basis. I ask who would like to take it home the first night, reminding the kids to think about their parents' schedules and if they know if their dad or mom will be home that evening. When the journal comes back the next day, I try to answer the entry on my lunch or prep time. I Xerox the response I made to the last night's entry and send that home to the parent who wrote last, and we send the journal home with another student. This gives each parent an immediate response and keeps the journal circulating. We miss some days, and when things get hectic, I can't always keep it up on a daily basis, but every parent usually gets to read and respond to the journal a few times over the course of the year. When the parents have questions or pose concerns about their children, I use those questions to talk about teaching, learning and curriculum. I've done it for two years now, and it's been a remarkable conversation. If you're going to be at NCTE in Chicago, I'll bring you last year's journal to see. I also typed up some entries from the first year I tried it, and I could snail mail those to you. Send me your address Audrey if you want me to mail you a sample. Good luck. It's a low tech way to have some extraordinary contacts with parents, and a safe way to bring busy or marginalized parents into the classroom. Take care, Love,

Audrey (Appelsies, 9/15/96) fine-tuned her response by explaining the particular aspect of types of entries she was interested in reviewing:

Toby—

Thanks a lot for the "instructions." I plan to begin the journal this week. I have many interested, supportive parents, and of course a few who I have not heard from yet. I would like to see the first year's journal. I am especially interested in your responses to difficult questions. Glad to read your year is off

to a good start. Mine is too. I think I am at a school similar to yours from what I recall.

Thanks again.

Although direct teaching requests such as this one appeared to involve only two teachers, it often became clear subsequently that others "listened in" and carried away the new practice as well. For instance, Omelia (Donahoo, 10/28/97), who had not participated in the dialogue on traveling journals wrote a month later:

> Speaking of administrators—we have a TON of parent journals going around Coastal Middle School in Savannah. Gloria has the only one that is done by a whole team of teachers, and it is going swimmingly! Mine is going, but we haven't gotten past the level of "oh, how great your kid is" and "oh, how glad I am you are my kid's teacher" stuff. Toby, how do you get to the real issues with the parents??? Anyway, what I wanted to tell you is that Marsha (our assistant principal) has started a roving Teacher's journal. She began by making an entry that lasted about five minutes and three lines. She went back a week later, dated it , and added, "This is really important. I want to do it." The first teacher she sent it to was a WP [writing project] fellow who responded candidly. Then she sent it out like a message in a bottle: she has gotten nothing but really cool stuff (and there ain't no lack of complaining—but it's quality complaining). She plans to make (ask) our principal to make an entry soon. Poor man! He's a real stand-up guy: he'll do it, but it will probably give him an ulcer.

Pedagogical strategies such as the "Identity Boxes" that Colleen (Fairbanks, 10/19/95) shared from Texas were also adapted across sites

> Audrey's sixth graders are just finishing up a 9 week unit on personal narrative, using Linda Rief's life

> graph as a way to generate story ideas. The kids are also constructing "identity boxes," collecting personal artifacts, pictures, etc., in addition to their personal narratives. The first week in November, the kids will be presenting their boxes to the class. We'll be keeping the video camera running!

Gloria (Dukes, 9/12/96) described the way the practice appeared in Georgia a year later as "Me Bags":

> . . . We started "Me Bags" today, the students brought in bags filled with items that represented them, their interests, hobbies, etc to share with a partner. It's just another way to get at biographical writing. Sharonda [Gloria's student teacher] and I brought ours too. She was able to see that although some of these kids are dealing with difficult situations, they are still just kids who collect model cars, stuffed animals, key chains, books and Nikes (We had one kid bring in all the tags he had saved from his Nike shoes—9 pairs)—just kids. So Sharonda oohed and ahhed and laughed today, and she didn't cry when Kareem showed her a picture of his mom who died when he was nine. Maybe that growth is already happening, Andy.

Unlike Toby's description and analysis of Traveling Parent Journals, Colleen and Gloria posted pedagogical strategies not in response to direct requests from colleagues, but knowing full well that project teachers were always interested in learning more about the practice across sites. When posted practices seemed meaningful to others, teachers invited colleagues to describe those strategies further. For instance, Tony (Tendero, 10/19/95) logged on after Colleen's initial description of "Identity Boxes" to request more information from Colleen or Audrey and to say

that he and the teachers at Authors Workshop were likely to use the strategy with students in New York:

> The identity boxes sound like a great idea. . . . They also sound like a direction that Margo, one of the teachers we may work with, was looking to go next. So I had a couple of questions for you and Audrey. . . .
>
> How did the process develop? Did the students do the boxes first or the narratives first? Are their stories solely about the artifacts in the boxes or are those a starting point?
>
> Finally, is Linda Rief's *Seeking Diversity* the one to which you referred?

One of the most popular texts used with students across sites was Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*. Several participants shared strategies for inviting student responses to the text. For instance, Sarah (Robbins, 10/21/95) described her practice of inviting students to read the chapter, "Four Skinny Trees," in conjunction with Robert Frost's poem, "Tree at My Window." She explained how she involved students in her methods course in the project: She asked the methods students to read and respond to the same two pieces of literature; then she asked the K-12 students and the methods students to share their responses to the texts. When others expressed a strong interest in the work at Sarah's site—both in terms of the writing assignments and the strategies for involving her methods students with K-12 students, Sarah posted several additional messages, elaborating on her practice.

Perhaps the clearest representation of resources that project participants supplied for one another is illustrated in a bibliography (under development) which evolved from and reflects project conversations. All of the 352 works cited in the bibliography were suggested either in response to a direct query from a participant or because a participant indicated that the work spoke to an issue under discussion. Although we never intended to create a project bibliography, we were moved to do so in the fall of 1995, after project teachers from Savannah created a list of the works that had been cited on the listserv during the first few months of that year. Because participants found the list useful, I returned to the printed log reports from the first year of the WFYL listserv conversation and developed a bibliography that was, thereafter, updated on a regular basis and distributed to project participants. Print works range from professional texts to adolescent literature and authors range from Shakespeare to Nathan McCall.

This bibliography is comprehensive in that it highlights not only print texts, but other media such as television, movies, and videos as well. It is not accidental that publications from other WFYL classes are listed first on it. A unique feature of the listserv and the bibliography is the

degree to which it includes WFYL student-produced resources. Participants regularly testified to the value of the student work that others drew to their attention and to their subsequent use of those materials with their own students.

In a survey distributed to project participants in March 1998, I asked: "Can you pinpoint any way in which the listserv conversation has influenced your teaching?" Many of the teachers noted how much they relied on one another to learn about valuable resources:

> The sharing of references and sources has been fantastic (Donahoo, 1998).
>
> I used specific texts (in my "girlbooks" grad course) that were suggested by participants (Robbins, 1998).
>
> Numerous ways!! I have used works mentioned on-line . . . (Sparks, 1998).
>
> I buy all the books mentioned . . . (Fishman, 1998).
>
> I particularly use resources mentioned on the listserv either as part of my work with composition students or to read for myself. I take suggestions for adolescent literature and pass them on to my colleague, Gretchen, who teaches adolescent lit and to Abby [her daughter] who is a reader of adolescent lit. (Alberts, 1998).
>
> Folks have shared some wonderful resources for my classroom . . . (Curry, 1998).

In addition to asking directly for and/or offering information or instruction about educational theory, philosophy, curriculum, and pedagogy, another method teachers used to identify resources and to share responses with one

another was to compose vignettes from our classrooms on the listserv. These compositions evoked discussions that participants claimed useful and generative. The subject line, "Classroom Windows," invited teachers to "gaze through one another's classroom windows" to learn from one another's experiences.

It was in response to this invitation (Swenson, 9/15/97) that teachers began to offer vignettes as resources for one another's professional development:

> Can we open some "WFYL windows"? Who's teaching what to whom this year? Did the kids seem to arrive with any burning issues, or will it be up to you to help them stoke their literacy fires? Did anyone get off to a particularly good/bad start to the school year?

Kevin (LaPlante, 9/18/97) observed:

> I've had an unusual start this year. I had over half my students with me last year in my split class, and in so many ways, we are not starting over as much as continuing the excellent work we started. Most of my students from last year absolutely jammed on those standardized tests, but more importantly, they continued to develop a love of learning that began with Toby the year before.
>
> Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for my new students. Let's just say I don't know what the hell they did last year. Still, we'll move forward from where they are at now.
>
> Teaching where I do is challenging for a lot of reasons, but one of the most troubling realities is the range of reading levels. I have students who read at a college level and those who can barely read, and not surprising, a whole chunk somewhere in between. I am expected to create curriculum where all students can not only be successful, they also must be challenged without

being overwhelmed. Trying to make all of this gel is the dilemma.

These issues are not new, but on top of the academic differences this year I have a few students who have some nasty attitudes. In this case the worst offenders all are female. We have been spending quite a bit of time discussing attitude, respect, and being polite. Well, today one of my rough girls said, "Being nice ain't me. You're trying to get me to act like some white girl."

I didn't say much at first, mainly because I didn't have to. So many of my fellow African-American children were outraged and did all the speaking necessary. One young man expressed it succinctly and eloquently. He said, "I can't believe you said that. It sounds like you're saying that only white people are nice. I know you're not saying that black folks don't have manners."

The discussion was on our year-long unit that explores the self, family, and community has just taken on a classroom life all its own. You couldn't write a script better if you tried. I'm always amazed by what surfaces when kids are given a voice. I think Audrey is seeing much of the same in her class. I love it when the students' lives actually can dovetail into what we are doing in class. Maybe the vision of "WFYL" is alive more than I care to admit.

Kevin's "Classroom Window" initiated a variety of conversational threads—some new, such as gender issues in the classroom and some renewed, such as the relationship between classroom discipline and community building, and student-initiated acts of racism and teacher response. As evidenced by responses to his posting, teachers saw in Kevin's entry concerns of their own and by sharing his vignette, he prompted us to articulate interests and concerns to which others responded. For instance Audrey (Appelsies, 9/19/98) replied:

> Kevin--it is great to hear from you. Those nasty attitudes are such a rough spot and what I had to contend with all year last year. Luckily you have so many students who will help you out. I also think it is a testimony to you and your fantastic teaching that the kids you already had are so outspoken. I wonder how/when the new kids will catch on. Interesting.
>
> I think my focus for the year relates to your problem—what are the conditions under which kids will truly listen to each other? How will these students become a part of the community? I am going to look closely to author share time and class meetings. Who listens to whom, why, and when? (This is different than me trying to find ways to get kids to find their voice and express it to me!)

And Debbie (Kinder, 9/19/97) found in both responses interests of her own for which she proposes a tentative hypothesis:

> I love the way Audrey stated one of the challenges of WFYL: what are the conditions under which kids will truly listen to each other? How will these students become a part of the community?
>
> I think that before kids become a part of THE community, they have to create one of their own . It happens in every classroom and the teacher is sometimes leading the way, and sometimes arranging things so the most positive responses can appear, and sometimes squelching negative crap, but ideally (for me) inviting kids to assume positive leadership of their own community. They don't get many chances to do this, so they're a little worried about the risk.
>
> Last year, Kevin, I had one classroom which was never safe, and it was because of two young women who were the some of the meanest students I have ever had. They had both been victims of lots of abuse which they wrote about and told the class about, but they were still very scary to their classmates. I tried lots of strategies but didn't get very far. It sounds like the Dewey Center kids are jumping in to push the positive view. My kids were too scared. Are girls more angry because they ultimately have less power than the

boys—in the world outside of our classrooms? Am I oversimplifying here?

And Sarah (Robbins, 9/19/97) distinguished the one thread of most interest to her and requested additional resources:

> What fascinating questions!
>
> I'm just now in the early stages of developing a syllabus for a class for our M. Ed. middle grades program for winter term, and I'm going to print these out to help my planning. The course is going to look at "literatures of girlhood and early womanhood," both professional books like Maureen Barbieri's Sound from the Heart and Finders' Just Girls and the omnipresent (just now) Reviving Ophelia—all of which I would recommend, though for different reasons—and some YA texts and traditional texts that would be esp. girl-focused and girl-empowering.
>
> Which brings me to my question:
>
> What would be some good novels, plays, and/or short stories for my syllabus?
>
> Thanks in advance!

In considering whether teacher participants on the WFYL project listserv were offering the types of resources and responses that their colleagues would find meaningful, in March 1997, I invited teachers to talk more about what they considered to be memorable professional development they had experienced and what they considered to be characteristics of "authentic" professional development.

Omelia noted the value of release time and of formal educational opportunities embedded in meetings with colleagues; and although we were not able to provide for "release time," evidence of "formal" educational

opportunities—or "direct teaching" were evident in the listserv conversation. Pam noted that self-directed professional development has worked best for her, and in a similar vein Debbie wrote that school-sponsored in-services have seldom been of value for her, and that "Write for Your Life has been the highlight of my teaching career" (Kinder, 3/2/97). The listserv offered both Pam and Debbie opportunities to initiate professional development that seemed meaningful to them. Sarah observed that professional development seems to occur when teachers have opportunities to share their practices with one another, and certainly both the episodes of direct sharing of pedagogy and resources and the opportunities to look through one another's "classroom windows" address that characteristic. Beth (Steffen, 3/9/97) stated simply,

> When this listserv is active, it's invaluable [for my professional development. . . . One of my professional development needs is active conversations and idea exchanges with excited educators. That's why WFYL means a lot to me.

Unlike a regularly scheduled graduate class, teacher research group, or inservice workshop, WFYL teachers are able to log on whenever they are moved to do so. This flexibility allows them to shape their professional development "at the point of need." Or as Audrey (Appelsies, 4/1/98) put it:

> . . . To think that I can write one day that I am afraid, and could you all help me and send me long responses and encouragement overnight is profound. I also think it is amazing that I, as a new-ish classroom teacher, have access to very, very experienced and well read people. . . . I know we have been through this discussion before but . . . it matters. . . .

3. Evaluating the resources and sources of information they are using

As we invited teachers to participate in Write for Your Life, we provided three foundational texts—Fred Hechinger's *Fateful Choices*, Joan Kaywell's *Adolescents at Risk*, and Patricia Lambert Stock's *The Dialogic Curriculum*. The Hechinger text was intended to offer teachers an opportunity to survey "the national scene" regarding issues influencing adolescent health and well-being. Kaywell's text served as a reference book with annotations of adolescent literature and informational reading selections organized around themes of adolescent health and well-being. Stock's text, *the* foundational text in the project, was intended to invite teachers to explore the rationale for dialogically-developed, inquiry-based, community-oriented curricula and to examine a case in point.

Interestingly, the Hechinger text was never mentioned on the listserv. The project design was for curriculum to evolve organically at sites, and teachers may have felt that while having a "big picture" for adolescent health issues was

important, it wasn't of immediate concern—the issues *their* students named in *their* contexts were the issues on which they requested resources. This situation presents an interesting parallel to our perception that students would not necessarily be interested in studying adolescent health issues in general, but the issues that troubled and complicated their own lives.

The Kaywell book was referred to as one ready resource when teachers needed to quickly know titles of relevant adolescent literature and non-fiction reference texts to suggest to student researchers; however, participants, as noted in the section above, showed a clear preference for the recommendations of their colleagues. One can readily understand this given another issue that surfaced regularly on the listserv—censorship.

When Laura voiced a call ("SOS") for help locating resources for her students' research into issues of alcoholism and substance abuse, I reminded her that she had access to the Kaywell book which listed more than eighty references in the alcohol and substance abuse chapter. The number of references, however, may have seemed overwhelming and not sufficiently discriminating. That is, teachers seemed to prefer both a more evaluative summary (Will my students

like the book?) and forewarning about potentially problematic sections (Is it a "safe" book to use?).

Issues of real or potentially negative parent response to adolescent literature selections had already been raised on the listserv since its initiation. In the second year, censorship focused on two texts—Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Want to Holler* and Chris Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs*. In the first instance, McCall's book was discussed on-line before it was used in classrooms, and afterwards, when teachers decided whether it was appropriate for their students and community. They discussed whether to offer the text intact or to "sanitize" excerpts and made local decisions.

In the second instance, the Crutcher book was discussed on-line only after it had been censored in one WFYL classroom. The risk to teachers of choosing the "wrong" text for use in a particular community was perceived to be very real. Omelia (Donahoo, 2/19/96) alluded to the tension this way:

> Chris Crutcher said in the preface to "Telephone Man" (something to the effect) that we do not want our children exposed in print to what they are exposed to in life. My wonderful books are coming in. Gloria's kids loved IT HAPPENED TO NANCY (about a 14 year old who contracted AIDS after date rape). I'm afraid to ask parents for permission to read it and afraid not to ask for permission. I know that my kids are writing,

> reading, and responding more seriously to issues that affect them. Where do we stand? Even as I know what I believe, early in the AM I plan to be whiting out "damn" on p. 49 and "bitch" on p. 52 of NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH. My kids are hanging on every word as we start reading this aloud, and I am scared to death. Advice???

As I noted in Chapter Three, teachers regularly and with great enthusiasm proclaimed the virtues of using students' texts from other WFYL sites. They knew they could rely on their colleagues not only to highlight problematic portions of trade books, but also those from their own publications, as Beth (Steffen, 10/23/97) did below. After receiving requests from almost all of her WFYL colleagues for copies of her most recent student publication, she advised them

> Hi,
>
> I am writing this little message because we all negotiate our communities and community standards in different ways.
>
> In my Media class there are 15 students. One is gay, out to his friends and me via his journal. Another is questioning his sexuality. Another has a gay brother whom he hates and whom he thinks is gay for attention. Another has a gay father who abused her and her mother and sister before his divorce from the family. We have weekly debates in class on topics the students select, and one of the first debates was on homosexual marriage. The lead-off statement by the student opposing gay marriage said, "I think all gay people should be put into a room, gassed and shot." A passionate debate ensued. I try to get dynamic and interesting speakers for my class so students can probe people's stories and write about them. Another week we debated whether or not a children's book, *Daddy's Roommate* which has gay parents as its theme, should be censored from our community library. Last Friday I had a gay married couple, one of whom has AIDS, visit my class. The students absolutely LOVED the speakers with whom they

talked in small groups for 90 minutes. They wrote stories about the guests, and now are including a story and a graphic about the couple in our publication.

Homosexuality as an issue ranges from volatile to taboo. It occurs to me before I run off copies of my class's little publication that some of you may be in places where texts about gay people are not considered classroom appropriate. If that is the case, please let me know. I can still send a copy of our feature paper for your information, if you wish. (Beth, 10/23/97)

Omelia (Donahoo, 10/28/97) wrote in response,

Beth, I really want your feature paper. I am sure we will run into controversy here in the south where such things [homosexuality] don't exist, but Gloria and I are both tenured (I think). Anyway, please mail or fax . . . me a copy and I will be sure it gets to Gloria's and my WFYL'ers. I can honestly say I'm not sure about Kim's fifth graders.

Of the three primary reference texts, undoubtedly, Stock's was the work that participants evaluated as the most useful as they developed the WFYL project in their individual sites. They turned to it for a variety of purposes:

Models for collaborations (Swenson, 11/26/96):

When I talked to Patti and David about my frustration, we noted the dissimilarity of this project to the Dewey (Eating on the Street), Saginaw (Dialogic Curriculum) and Rogers City projects earlier in which there was a 1:1 pairing of university folks and classroom folks. We decided that that model [illustrated in the *Dialogic Curriculum*] was far superior to the one we had developed for WFYL and decided to do what we could to evolve this one into one that looked more like the previous ones.

Uses of student anthologies (Swenson, 1/8/97):

Many/most of you have probably read Patti Stock's book, *The Dialogic Curriculum*. Wendy Gunlock and

Gilbert Sanchez—and many other students mentioned in passing in DC—published their pieces in a student anthology titled *The Bridge* [which teachers could then request to practice thematizing on-line and with students].

Interpreting the role of the teacher in project classrooms (Swenson, 3/18/97):

> [Noting some differences between the model for The Dialogic Curriculum and current enactments of Write for Your Life] As the teacher in a dialogic, inquiry-based classroom [such as the one modeled in the *Dialogic Curriculum*], how do you position yourself vis-a-vis any/each of these:
>
> 1. student initiated inquiry
> 2. student directed inquiry
> 3. the tension between students' inquiries and students composing healthy lives
> 4. student sense of agency
> 5. "they might not fully understand without my help"
> 6. the "catchpoint"—students going through the motions versus real student engagement

Models for student writing assignments (Steffen, 10/6/97):

> Next week is our glorious state-mandated test, which I mention because I know in the past you have had the pleasure of squirming under its constraints too.
>
> I have been trying this year, for the first time with sophomores, to set up a reading workshop with some pretty cool texts. We're reading, together as a class, excerpts from a handful of books: *Kaffir Boy*, the memoir of a young man who grows up under apartheid in South Africa; *Parrot in the Oven* (last year's National Book Award winner by Victor Martinez—Tony has mentioned it before) a beautifully-rendered, poignant story of growing up about a Mexican American boy; Different Seasons by Stephen King
>
> We're reading "The Body" and will write growing up stories a la the project Patti Stock describes in *Dialogic Curriculum*; and Concrete Candy which I've

mentioned before—a book about adolescence, street issues, and race by a 15 year-old African American from Oakland, CA. After we read excerpts of these books, I am going to ask students to finish the one they liked or cared about the most, and to work in groups on a series of projects they design as they read and write about issues their book suggests to them. The bloody testing interrupts our reading workshop—I lose my sophomores for a week because of it.

As a way of thinking about student resistance and participation (Schaafsma, 2/1/97):

> Audrey, Richard sounds like an interesting challenge (from a few thousand miles away, anyone can seem "interesting" to a university professor). Looks like he is working, though! Which is great. Makes me think of The *Dialogic Curriculum*, when Patti talks of a gang member and how he transformed his own work and the work of the class. . . Maybe. . .

As a model for preservice teacher preparation programs (Schaafsma, 1/19/95):

> The emerging teachers in our program loved the *Dialogic Curriculum*, Janet, as one good way to reach kids' lives and help them grow intellectually. Did I tell you two women, Melisa Cedeno and Nadeen Herring, both very much suffering this term from their own "health" issues, are starting a writing project in a community center in the South Bronx, after hearing about and doing some WFYL, and reading Patti's book? YEAH!!

As a curriculum development model that is student-centered and challenging (Swenson, 12/1/95):

> Touchy-feely. You know that's what we're (the leftwing baby boomers) frequently accused of being. We want to help kids get "in touch" with their beings. Right now, I feel Meg and Matt have so many beings, it would be a real challenge to get "in touch" with half of them. I think we all have varying degrees of comfort with our roles as "guide on the side"; varying ways we

interpret how much "guiding" we do—how much directing. When I read *The Dialogic Curriculum*, I feel comfortable with it—the teachers appear to me (I KNOW I'm using DANGEROUS language here)...experts. They move Gilbert from talk about migrant workers/working to reading and writing about Studs Terkel. These are demanding teachers—they don't "demand," but they "expect" important, serious work. What's important? What's serious? What comes from the kids and what comes from us?

As a frame for articulating our practice to the "other" (Schaafsma, 12/29/97):

> Pam, I liked your thoughtful response to the discussion. It does seem to resonate with others' views. The only thing I would say to pick up on themes I saw previously—and to echo one of Janet's concerns—is that "laissez-faire" is the language of critique from the Right about inquiry-based and whole language approaches. We either need to say, with clarity and forcefulness why we indeed embrace "laissez-faire" approaches to curriculum, or rename it as something other than what others may criticize it for. My reading of Patti Stock's *Dialogic Curriculum* is that it demonstrates how this kind of work is orderly, responsible, careful, scholarly, all the things that conservatives want to see in classrooms; what you and Alan seem to emphasizing is the open-ness, the necessarily laissez-faire-ness of such an approach, which Patti certainly acknowledges but doesn't want to emphasize (anticipating her critics, in part, perhaps). I think we can speak to these concerns very directly in our pieces [for a book on WFYL] if we wish, but certainly in our introductory section of the book.

We used the listserv to try to push ourselves to continue to articulate our beliefs about teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogy, school and community for one another, not only in examining Stock's text, but in responding to texts of others as well. Although we clearly

felt an affinity toward particular theorists such as Freire and Bakhtin, we tried to push ourselves and one another to articulate the "Why's" underlying our beliefs. Omelia, for instance, pondered (Donahoo, 2/5/96):

> Like a couple of you guys (Y'all), I bought both books [Hirsch and Sizer] and decided to dig into Hirsch first (knowing how much I would hate it). This guy scares me; I keep repeating to myself "He says Friere is wrong." Can that be a mantra???

And I responded (Swenson, 11/6/96):

> I hope Hirsch leads you into talking to yourself, Omelia :) arguing with him and defending Freire, and in the process clarifying for yourself what it is about Freire's work that resonates for you in your daily practice and experience. By the way—I'm reading him now too—so if you hear reports from Michigan about some crazy woman talking to herself in the car and getting red in the face, you'll know who they're talking about.

And we attempted to find the common ground with those with whom we didn't feel much "ready" affinity. For instance, as part of a longer discussion on issues of power embedded in the Write for Your Life project curriculum and enactment, Tony (Tendero, 11/30/97) observed [this dialogue is presented more fully in Section 10, "Learning in Depth Around Important Issues"]:

> In terms of responses to folks like Ed [Hirsch] and Bill [Bennett], I think that in ways we share some of the same spaces. (As opposed to some of the work that might happen in a writing workshop focused solely on the craft of writing). WFYL seems to engage in more of the social and action realms (Kevin's and Al's students doing peer mediation, Jen's students working on

pregnancy prevention, Beth's students starting to study homosexuality). Ed and Bill want to work on the social realm (by creating a common culture). It seems like, to be able to do some of this action, one needs to understand the function of some of this common culture (along with its forms like the letter from Beth's students) and how to use these things. Jen's students need to understand some of how the Columbus story has shaped how our nation has evolved. They need to understand how people like Bill and Ed might tell the Columbus story AND they need to understand how someone like Howard Zinn in "The People's History of the United States" might tell it. Jen's students are already starting to compare some of their present day concerns with peer pressure, to Columbus' use of pressure in the "new world." In some ways this seems to be a way of both acknowledging Bill's and Ed's values, while also offering other dimensions and connections to students present day.

And I (Swenson, 2/6/96) noted not only the way that reading those who are likely to hold alternative views might be provocative and generative, but questioned whether we might need to look critically at our own beliefs and suggested that inviting conversations with colleagues with alternative viewpoints might be beneficial:

> At the risk of sounding like a fanatic...I think the value of Hirsch IS that he says Freire is wrong. Can I be crazy? I have some colleagues who think people like Hirsch who think all students NEED/SHOULD read Shakespeare, Milton, Hemingway, Whitman (and other white guys) are CRAZY, however, they also feel all pre-service teachers should read Dewey, Freire, Bakhtin, Volosinov, Ong and Vygotsky. Have we our own canon? How many texts do we read that support our positions as opposed to those that challenge them? I think (am I putting words in your mouths?) that's why David and Tony thought reading Hirsch was such a good idea.
>
> A couple of years ago, I had a woman in a writing project one-week open institute—she was bright, well-

> read, lots of experience, self-confident. She also believed strongly that we were failing to meet student needs by not teaching grammar as a distinct subject. She was a wonderful "foil"—I couldn't ever convince her of my viewpoint, but I did clarify my stance for myself. Now I hunger for those who would challenge my positions—they force me to reflect and clarify what it is I think I know about teaching. Otherwise, the day to day stuff gets too important and I don't get around to this as much as I would like.

As we read, we explored tensions between the works of those with whom we aligned, but who seemed in conflict with one another, such as Delpit's *Other People's Children* and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; and the places of affirmation and dissent between authors like Ladson-Billings and our own practice and experiences.

Participants on the WFYL listserv evaluated the sources and resources of information with which they sought to inform their practice. They read texts that reinforced views they had established they held in common, and they read texts that opposed their viewpoints. We reinforced for one another the value of stating clearly the reasons for our positions.

Undoubtedly, the resources participants evaluated most favorably , however, were one another. As Joye frames it, "The [listserv] conversation feeds me, encourages me, inspires me, and urges me on . . . I carry this conversation around in my head always. . . . "

4. Expressing and validating the professionalism, exemplary work and instructional leadership of others in the community

What do we mean by teacher "professionalism"? Some think it means teachers' formal study in their fields. Others look for indications of informal study such as reading alone or with a study group, attending related workshops and presenting at conferences. Still others look for indications of a commitment of time, energy, thoughtfulness, purposefulness and critical reflection invested in a teacher's work. All of these were evidenced and recognized by many of the professional educators in the WFYL network.

In September 1996, Debbie announced that she had successfully defended her dissertation, which looked at a year of the WFYL project in her Platteville, Wisconsin classroom. Debbie's reflective practice—keeping a teaching journal and reflecting on what she was learning from studying that journal—became a model for other teachers in the project. The 1996 academic year began with a lengthy conversation on the value and methods of keeping teaching journals that she initiated.

Debbie was not the only teacher, however, to decide to pursue further formal studies after joining the WFYL project. Tony, Laura, Toby, and Kevin all decided to enter graduate study while participating in WFYL. Laura, Audrey, and others

wrote on the listserv about the various summer workshops they attended. Many of the teachers elected to attend National Writing Project summer institutes and teacher research institutes. Several teachers applied this past spring for the *Rethinking Schools* summer writing institutes.

We continued to read professional texts and reflect on-line together. Sizer and Hirsch became the source of conversations beginning in the fall of 1996, and we continue to reference their observations.

While some may suppose professionalism resides in whatever endeavors teachers undertake outside the classroom, others believe that the true mark of a "professional" teacher is evidenced inside the classroom. Teaching well is hard work, and one may wonder why teachers chose to take on the additional burden of developing curricula, like the Write for Your Life curriculum, when they do not need to do so. Audrey (Appelsies, 1/5/98) eloquently addressed this issue:

> I often wonder how much easier it would be if I assigned essays about lemons and such. What would I believe if I taught that way? What would I think kids are able to do or not able to do without my intense guidance?
>
> At the same time I fret that their writing isn't "good" enough because they are all working on their own things and where are their models?...
>
> Today I had kids designing and beginning to write a classroom newspaper (they thought it would be good to report on their class meetings); others were writing to

> their Japanese pen pals; and still others were drafting or polishing various family stories.
>
> I am most alive, engaged, and truthfully happy when my students are doing these types of writing activities. I look around and ... they are busy, time oriented (give us more time, how much more time do we have?); and asking me and others questions. They ask to go in the hall; use the computer or call their grandmother for ideas. My students seem alive, passionate, and happy when they are given the latitude to respond to the status question, "Tell me what you are going to do today."
>
> I act like a teacher, coach, cheerleader and parent. I like the combination and my students seem to too. They ask me for things they need like time to work on the newspaper in class or a pot luck dinner for their parents to see/hear their writing.
>
> I agree with the Big Tent [that many of us may have different approaches]. I have no idea if this is what your classrooms look or sound like. And does that matter? I think we all have certain underlying beliefs about the kind of work we want to do with kids and what are some powerful ways to engage kids in learning.
>
> I also know I can fit under the Big Tent...without my quotes, Big Words, or yyyeeeeaaaarrrrs of experience.

Exemplary work was easy to identify on the listserv since it led others either to ask for additional information about it or to laud its value (see, for example, the discussion of Toby's Traveling Parent Journals, earlier in this chapter, which was subsequently instituted in sites as distant as Texas, Oklahoma, Minnesota and Georgia).

But it wasn't only practice that inspired acclaim. On January 30, 1996, Debbie opened a description of her own classroom by observing, "Laura, Audrey, the Marietta gang, you are inspiring!" This kind of observation was made time

and time again, sometimes in response to pedagogical approaches that seemed particularly apt, sometimes in response to a curricular focus that seemed necessary but tricky, sometimes for raw courage and stamina in the face of what seemed "teacher-crushing" obstacles.

Many teachers joined on-line initiatives to develop conference proposals and subsequently gave their first conference presentations under the auspices of WFYL. Others such as Colleen and Audrey from Austin, and Mary and Sarah from Marietta, published pieces on their developing understandings of project work for colleagues. Beth Steffen, from Wisconsin, has a forthcoming piece in *English Journal*.

Sarah Robbins contrasted the type of professional development WFYL teachers were offering for one another on-line with that offered locally in her state, noting that Georgia teachers were being "trained to teach kids what they need to know about writing" in a course called *Power Writing*, which provides students with a "formula" for each essay they write. Sarah lamented these teachers' resistance to "the complexities about the way language functions" and simultaneously applauded her WFYL colleagues for resisting "reductive" understandings and for enabling their students to

engage in "real power" writing with the potential of changing communities.

Toby Curry was widely recognized and referred to by network teachers as a "mentor" and "sage," but in response to our November meeting in Chicago, Toby (Curry, 11/25/96) logged on the listserv and turned the tables

> It was a very stimulating meeting. I'm sure that I haven't clearly communicated to all of you how grateful I am for the thoughtful discussion topics and how when we pose questions for each other it nudges us all to think through what we do and why we do it. I am especially awed by our younger teachers like Audrey, Laura, Jennifer and Kevin and how wise they are at such a young age. I could NEVER have engaged kids in such valuable experiences when I had only been teaching a few years. When I compare how I "came to begin to really understand literacy" with the incredible teaching that I see with our younger colleagues, I am convinced that there must be some great things going on in Teachers Ed programs. I'm really beginning to value the possibilities of mentoring and sharing with one another in our WFYL work . . . Thanks to all of you for helping me rethink the research process I use with my kids and for stimulating my thinking about reaching out to the community . . . .

Obviously moved, Audrey (Appelsies, 11/26/96) wrote back simply, "I challenge myself because of people like you."

5. <u>Reflecting on and critically reviewing project work through the collaborative development of publication opportunities</u>

Very early in the project, participants took advantage of professional development opportunities that exist when

teachers are preparing proposals for workshop and conference presentations.

In the fall of 1994, as we made plans on-line for a WFYL Student Manuscript Day at Michigan State University during which a film crew from Robert Morris College would film work for a documentary on writing across the curriculum, project participants determined how they would use precious time during which students from Michigan sites would be together. In addition, those who were to be interviewed for the video discussed the facets of the project on which they were most likely to be asked questions ("In what ways does the writing students undertake in WFYL help them to learn disciplinary material? In what ways do the styles in which they are writing translate into workplace demands and settings?").

Preparing for Manuscript Day and the Robert Morris video prompted us to think about the specific types of writing students were being asked to undertake and the purposes and audiences for those pieces. Preparing for the day students would spend together, we considered how best to facilitate student response groups and how best to illustrate for students the ways in which we imagined their narrative pieces might lead to additional writing, research, and finally into community service projects.

As I reviewed the day on-line with participants, I mentioned that one of the undergraduate writing consultants from the Michigan State University Writing Center had noted that students might have benefited from some large group modeling of peer response, and Linda (Rebney, 11/30/94) observed:

> . . . I like the idea of the demonstration of effective peer response. I think that will be helpful next time. We learn by doing, don't we. . . .

and, I would add, by developing and reflecting on our plans on-line.

In addition to planning local conference days, for three years, on-line, we have discussed, revised and refined our proposals for fall and spring National Council of Teachers of English conferences and for the NCTE/DOD/NWP "Global Conversations" conferences. Colleen (Fairbanks, 11/29/95) observed that constructing proposals that way opened new ways of looking at what was happening in our classrooms.

> . . . Having such a plan [for a conference proposal] will also help us think about [how] we want to focus our own classroom studies (i.e. what happens, in a concrete and richly detailed way, when we open our curriculum to students to explore their lives). One of the things that interests me the most about our various collaborations is the ways in which our partnerships evolve and develop, how they support teacher research and professional development.

Prompted by immediate felt need to reflect on site work as the conversation around the workshop proposal continued, Sarah (Robbins, 11/30/95) stated

> Here in Marietta, we're going to talk about how to find time to reflect—in a more organized way than we have so far—on our own learning.

One of the most recent (November 1997) NCTE proposals for a full-day workshop offered at a WFYL site—at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit—offered multiple opportunities for us to review our work critically. The invitation (Swenson, 12/13/96) to collaborate on the proposal began the chain of events:

> For four years, we've "lusted" for the opportunity to do a longer workshop at NCTE, and it appears we're "guaranteed" that opportunity this year—BUT...we still have to propose it. Can you think with me about this?
>
> Think about colleagues from other school districts/universities who could be sitting in our workshop. What would they want to know? What would they want an opportunity to do?
>
> Can we try to do this on e-mail?

Participants offered various perspectives on what they thought we should do collaboratively and on what they thought they could offer as an area of "expertise." The following second call (Swenson, 1/15/97) reflected those early contributions.

> I'm sorry I'm not putting the exact copy of the WFYL/NCTE proposal here (I'm planning to draft tomorrow now that I have a sense of where I'm going [from your various notes]).I'll put forward a proposal for a workshop (I'll make a note that IF AT ALL POSSIBLE we need to go on Monday, Pat).
>
> I'll begin with one of our generic [previously developed] one paragraph/2-3 line descriptions of what WFYL is. Then I'll use much of the wording from the already [previously] proposed session to describe a collaborative/interactive morning in which participants are writing their own stories, sharing, looking for themes, and discussing implications for research and action in those themes. I'll then describe the afternoon by VIOLATING their [NCTE] guidelines (risk taker that I am) and describing breakout sessions by location with names in parentheses. The sessions I have [that you proposed] are...
>
> Dewey Center—Toby & Kevin's classroom visits
> Texas—products emerging from student research
> NYC—teens studying issues of teen sexuality
> Savannah—teens helping younger children with transitions from elementary to middle school
> Wisconsin—the letter exchange between Platteville and Beloit High Schools
> Technology—a brief look at the implications of technology for the project—e-mail & video.

On reading this brief sketch and thinking about the work of the cohort as well as his own concerns, Tony (Tendero, 1/16/97) responded,

> I would sign-up for this workshop in a heartbeat . . . if I weren't already a part of it. It will be very cool. Janet, you already know how cool I think you are . . . your point person work here only serves to multiply my worship. :) Thank you. Is there any chance of setting up an opportunity for a cross-site conversation on standards/testing issues like the technology? I realize it will probably be a part of the conversation at a number of roundtables, so if it isn't possible . . . that'll be fine.
>
> I'm excited about this opportunity to share our work in a different format!!

Pat (Fox, 1/16/97) concurred and began to imagine the configuration for this session as well as publication of our work in the future,

> I agree with Tony. This is the kind of session I would fight to be part of. With a sign-up limit of 40, though, do we want all the breakout sessions in the PM to be concurrent? Or, do we want to run them half and half in two blocks?
>
> We can always think our way through the logistics later on I guess. I'm just wondering about dividing the group of 40 into six or seven subgroups.
>
> Thank you, Janet. I wish I could do more to help you with this. I wonder if we couldn't take some time in the off season (When IS that?) to map out a few WFYL proposals in several formats and time frames that would just be there in the files for us to pop out on the next occasion.

Publication of the next draft was offered with important explanations embedded. NCTE had limited to four the number of people whose names could appear on the proposal as "facilitators." For the first time, we were asked to identify one person at each site who would be publicly recognized as representing the work of the site. I explained that the rationale for the first designations which identified university participants at three of the four sites was based not on a criterion that valued one instructional setting over another but on individuals' longevity (Colleen and David) with the project and/or who had sent the actual copy (Pat and Debbie) I was using.

Composing each conference proposal together on the listserv constituted a professional development opportunity because each statement asked us to reflect on and critically review project work in order to 1) define the purpose and design of the project and reach consensus on those definitions, 2) decide on the project elements or experiences that would be most beneficial to present, 3) determine that area of project work on which participants felt particularly well positioned to present, 4) determine the way in which to use our time to highlight what we considered relatively important features of the project, 5) determine who would speak and how they would do so for different aspects of project work.

The only amendments offered to this draft of our proposal were changes to the designations of site "leaders." David suggested first that Tony be designated from his site—then noted that it was most appropriate to discuss that at the site before reaching a decision. Pat, a university participant, suggested that Gloria, a classroom teacher, lead their site; Colleen, a university participant, deferred to Grace, a classroom teacher; and Beth and Debbie, both classroom teachers, deferred to one another before Debbie was identified as the "leader."

Developing the conference proposal offered us opportunities to think about who was leading the work in sites in which the collaborations were mutually satisfying. It also, once again, highlighted our differences as well as our similarities. When Kevin (LaPlante, 1/2/98) asked for clearer models for the focus of the book proposal we were developing on-line, he clearly stated, "I feel this structure, examples, and encouragement needs to come from the project leadership"—referring to David and me—despite the fact that it was Debbie, a fellow teacher who had initiated the call for manuscripts. Conversely, university participants, in reflecting on their conversation on the listserv and in the project clearly saw the classroom teachers as "leading" the way:

> I feel my role makes me peripheral to those who are central, the classroom teachers (Fishman reflection, 1998).
>
> . . . my role [is to provide] support for Heather [the classroom teacher] . . . (Alberts, 1998).

Not only did successful negotiation of conference proposals and thoughtful plans for representing project research constitute professional development for those involved, but the presentations themselves offered additional opportunities as did debriefing after them.

After the proposal for the NCTE presentation was accepted, and the workshop, despite low attendance, was deemed a success, one of the longest, most sustained, and potentially most important conversations was initiated by Debbie on the wisdom of producing a book focused on our WFYL work and experiences. This conversation under such various headings as "Let's Spread the Word," "The Write for Your Life Project, Vol. 1" and "Is WFYL Radical?" led us to articulate and examine deep-seated beliefs we held about our work. As we talked about whether in such a book we would focus primarily on our struggles or our successes, the degree to which we would concentrate on the project model or the "messiness" of the enactment of that model, the extent to which we would concentrate on the political rather than the pedagogical nature of our work, the discussion highlighted the convergence and divergence in our beliefs and practices. This conversation led David (Schaafsma, 1/5/98) to refer to WFYL as the "Big Tent," capable of including those with a variety of political and philosophical stances:

> There [are] too many different views here—from neo-conservative to progressive, is my guess—for us to pretend we have a "coherent" shared political/ pedagogical philosophy. It is more akin to a "big tent" view of [the project] including the views of several folks working on a similar principle from various positions. It is, for me, a kind of "difference"

> political/pedagogical model which doesn't insist on methodological purity by any means.

To which Kevin (LaPlante, 1/5/98) replied:

> I think the "big tent" imagery holds a lot of weight, and I agree that there are some outstanding teachers sharing space under that big top. Maybe "WFYL" won't obtain revolutionary radicalism (Shucks, I'm always up for a good fight), but that doesn't mean we can't put on one hellava show. The diversity of thinkers, teachers, writers, and people not only serves as a strong suit in terms of what "we" have to say, that same diversity also is a tribute to our profession. It's rare when so much passionate positioning can be channeled into something positive. In a way that's the ideal community we attempt to foster in our classrooms, isn't it?

It also illuminated our differences for us as nothing else had, and acknowledging those differences allowed us to determine how and if we would continue to work together.

The listserv conversation in which we drafted the conference proposal I've described led to a day in which participants felt inspired by their own work and that of their colleagues, and that day, in turn, led WFYL participants to reflect further on their work as they discussed another publication opportunity.

6. <u>Reflecting on and examining their own teaching and learning and moving away from less productive practices and toward theoretical bases for their teaching</u>

In the next chapter, I argue that the project listserv provided participants with a site for regular reflection on their teaching and learning and that their reflections were

particularly generative because they were embedded in dialogues with one another. Here, with reference to a representative conversational thread focusing on the relationship between curriculum development and student motivation, I illustrate our on-going reflection, examination, and assessment of our teaching, what we were learning from our teaching, and our search for theoretical bases for our teaching decisions.

On the WFYL listserv, teachers regularly examined issues influencing student motivation. Several teachers voiced concerns about sustaining student interest and investment in their work. For instance, in reflecting on his students and their I-Search papers, Tony (Tendero, 4/28/95) noted:

> Question for the general WFYL population . . . how are people handling (have handled?) students who choose a topic of inquiry and then start to lose interest . . . when we really haven't finished what we set out to do? I have some students who after choosing an issue have now decided [to quit] or at least are grumbling about it . . .

In analyzing her students' responses to their peers' presentations of their research, Debbie (Kinder, 3/31/96) observed:

> In Platteville I returned and praised the I-Searches and then pulled our chairs in a circle to share information. It bombed. They didn't want to talk about their searches or listen to one another.

And Laura (Vander Ploegh, 4/8/96) voiced a similar concern:

> Your report on students' responses to each others I-Searches sounds vaguely familiar: I had two days of sharing in my room, and at times it felt a little like pulling teeth.

Beth (Steffen, 12/3/97) noted the potential consequences of failing to garner student interest and investment:

> My school, consistently one of the five largest in the state of Wisconsin, which is among the 33% most populous states in America, has a huge and persistent problem with truancy. We have a special grade, F-, for the kids who fail because they are absent (the argument goes that it's not fair to hold teachers accountable for failing students if the students' bodies are not in the classroom).
>
> When kids are not in school, they can't learn, they can't develop skills to be safe in the modern world, and their poverty and violence (today one of my students, the most hard core gangbanger I know well whose nickname is Trigga, showed my sophomore class the gunshot wound in his knee cap) swallow them. My WFYL classes are well attended. Rarely does anyone fail (including with an F- grade). At Beloit Memorial, kids come to WFYL classes and skip more traditional classes. Their success is wholly attributable to the relevance of the curriculum that they help to define in their lives.

Participants in the conversation named a variety of pedagogical approaches that might address the identified concerns, such as varying the audience (Swenson, 4/9/96):

> One idea on I-Search shares—Is there a way of broadening the audience? . . . I was wondering . . . could parents, and some local folks come and visit "booths" of kids grouped by some similar feature of their research, and could the kids share their general findings rather than read the papers? We used to do something like this called "Passports"—kids had to get their "passports" stamped from different sites, and each site (type of research) had a different stamp.

Varying both the audience and the purpose (Tendero, 4/12/96):

> One thing I did notice [in doing I-Searches with students] that held their attention was this notion of the research they were doing was going to link to their interests of "doing something." . . . the students who got most excited about sharing their research and subsequent "do something" projects were the ones that saw and connected with "real audiences." . . . They researched about media violence and made a video for the PTA or they read about racism and did a presentation in a fourth grade classroom or they researched issues of respect and they shared them with Brownie troops, or they researched anorexia and shared the paper with their doctor or they researched about their spiritual health as a Christian and shared it with their youth group.

> (Swenson, 1/20/95): There are lots of things I like about providing students with this opportunity/ experience [of writing grant proposals]. One, as I noted before, is that the teacher becomes the coach of the team and someone else is the assessor, another is that the writing results in action which is a new idea for some students, another is that the writing project entails lots of different types of writing for lots of different purposes—they write an abstract, an introduction in which they try to persuade the readers that their school/class is a viable unit to fund (lots of kids will probably see a PA 25 or school improvement document or interview the principal for this kind of info—plus writing about their own class). The "Need" section requires research—the kids have to document that the "problem" is a problems, They can do library research, interviews with "authorities" or surveys of their peers. The "program goals and objectives, methods/activities and evaluations" sections require clear, descriptive writing. The students are asked to determine the objective they're trying to reach, the way they plan on reading it and the way they'll be able to tell after the fact whether they were successful. The budget is firsthand research (call and get price quotes) and technical writing. I like it that grants foster altruism, that they move/remove the "classroom walls," and that the re-search is also I-search. There's lots I like about it.

Or simply validating the entire project (Fox, 2/26/96):

> Omelia and I have just been talking about what makes WFYL so special, and it is precisely because it takes us all beyond "schooly" activities (John Dixon calls them "dummy runs") to real world literacy where we can talk about real issues. Omelia says that in 11 years in middle school she has never had so many students so engaged or participated in classroom discussions that were so honest. We must be doing something right.

But teachers realized that issues surrounding student motivation and pedagogical practices were more deeply seated than a focus on practice alone acknowledged. They realized that curriculum development and beliefs about teachers' and students' roles in the classroom and in curriculum development were also of great importance. For instance, teachers questioned the way in which student research themes were named and validated, and these questions raised more questions of power in the classroom and beyond (Issues of power will be addressed more directly in Section 10, "Studying topics in depth including issues of school reform.")

WFYL teachers appeared to have no doubt that the adolescents in their classrooms face the same challenges to their health and well-being as students across the nation and that this reality has consequences for student motivation and investment in classroom work. As illustrated in this section and elsewhere, students regularly identified issues related

to their health and well-being as ones that they wished to study and write about.

Two WFYL project teaching practices related to these issues became topics of concern to teachers: Did the student topics originate with students? Did teachers validate particular *types* of topics? While it is difficult to document changes in classroom practices as a result of the listserv conversation, I would suggest that through participation in the project, teachers developed a heightened consciousness of their curricular choices—including the restraints on those choices—and the real and potential implications of curricular choices and teacher response. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Paulo Freire suggests that there is a certain imperialism in teachers naming the focus of student study—an inference that teachers know what is best for the lives of others. Consistent with his observation, the early vision of the WFYL project expressed in the project proposal was that topics would emerge from students' lived experiences:

> [we believe] . . . students become more effectively literate when they read and write about issues of concern to them in their daily lives, another [belief] is that students become proficient writers when they write for real audiences whom they hope to interest in their concerns, peers and adults whom they hope will support them in efforts to address and solve the

problems that confront both students and adults (Stock, Schaafsma, & Robinson, p. 2).

Validating that approach, we consistently referenced examples by looking at the work of Wendy Gunlock and Gilbert Sanchez in Stock's *Dialogic Curriculum*. In her text, Stock demonstrates the methods she and her colleagues used to invite students to write in order to help them explore and identify issues of great concern to them. We emphasized in listserv conversations that brainstorming lists as opposed to finding topics embedded in other pieces of student writing were likely to generate lists and topics to which students might not have a deep commitment.

Teachers continued to voice the struggle of helping students identify those topics. For instance, Audrey (Appelsies, 1/4/95) observed:

> Today we talked about issues in our lives. They read their journals and writing folders. I modeled how to sift through the pages and look for some things that keep popping out. Those "things" are important. This was tough for them, but when <u>we started talking about their communities</u>, the brainstorming was easier [emphasis mine].

And Pat (Fox, 1/95) noted:

> We are trying at this point to offer rich opportunities for students to find their stories. We are open to what works and confident that themes will emerge without forcing them. They already have.

And she (Fox, 3/6/95) observed again:

> We shared Audrey's students' topics with both Omelia's and Gloria's kids and it really does help some of them to identify and clarify their own issues to see the zone that others are working.

Later Audrey (Appelsies, 1/19/96) used a reference to themes emanating from talk again:

> The stories, personal <u>experiences these kids have told me</u> that are the driving force of these quests, are fascinating. I can't put their lives out of my head [emphasis mine].

My interest in how teachers and students were naming student research themes grew, leading me (Swenson, 1/19/96) to ask participants a series of questions about students' processes for choosing topics for their writing and research.

> Could the rest of you help me with some research I'm doing? Here are the questions I have for you:
>
> 1. Where did your students' research topics come from? Audrey mentions that the kids have "told" her about their "quests" and that they have "conversations" that amaze her.
> 2. Did the kids' quest topics emanate from personal (one-on-one) conversations, small group conversations, whole group discussions?
> 3. Can you, for each student, point to a particular piece of writing and say, "Right here, here's the first place _____ mentioned her/his topic"?
> 4. Can you find a place in their writing for some, but not all of the students?
> 5. If you find a place in their writing that names a focus, how often do you think that focus came from experiences they have had? from something they have read? from conversations with someone other than you?
> 6. If the quest (I love that word) topic came from a piece of writing, what were the writing prompts that were most successful at generating student writing that produced quest topics?

Audrey (Appelsies, 1/30/96) responded to the questions on the listserv but then logged on again to note:

> Your questions are coming up in my conversations with Colleen. I think they are becoming part of our research too.

Often, I suggested to teachers that they might want to do some whole-class modeling by using excerpts from *The Bridge*, an anthology of Saginaw students' writing. All had copies of the book. On the listserv, we noted themes embedded in several pieces in the book. I also shared the process through which Kevin and I met to workshop the themes in his students' writing, noting that the themes we identified might not be the themes students either saw or those which interested them.

Concern about the degree to which teachers "prompt" and "validate" themes students choose for study dates to early in the project. Tony (Tendero, 3/2/95) noted:

> . . . I find that my toughest issue with following student interest in issues about their lives is getting them to believe that this is their deal. They want me to direct them. And that is tough, because their parents want me to direct them too . . .

Although not everyone had that experience. Alan (Shinaver, 3/8/95), for one, observed:

> My sophomores have been "running the classroom" since October. They're writing grants to instill peer counseling, peer mediation, publishing their progress,

> holding a press conference and getting a speakers series going . . .

Participants weren't concerned only with issues surrounding student "ownership" and the implications for student investment, but also with the nature of the topics being named, given the project's focus on adolescent health and well-being. Some teachers noted that their students, upon occasion, had found the health issues focus "overwhelming" (in Tony's class), "depressing" (in Kevin's class), or "morbid" (in Debbie's class). And some just questioned what "counts." Debbie (Kinder, 12/16/95) asserted:

> Our classrooms offer a chance to talk about real and important issues. No one is forced to tell his or her story, but I think hearing real and painful stories from classmates may be necessary as we learn the true purpose of language, which is to tell stories that matter.

But David (Schaafsma, 12/16/95) questioned:

> As soon as I decide that [that telling important stories is the true purpose of language] for everyone I am as guilty as any dictator of English . . . If you think that all people have to "tell stories that matter" who decides "what matters"? . . .

Toby maintained that teachers, not only in their roles *as teachers*, but also as *members* of inquiry and learning communities, had the right and the responsibility to introduce curricular themes on occasion—and used as an

illustration her own introduction of the study of AIDS, given her knowledge of the high incidence of the disease in the community in which her students live. I (Swenson, 1/8/97) noted that the way in which teachers introduce such subjects may have profound influence on how they are taken up by students:

> You know, Ton, the thing I've noticed about the outstanding teachers in WFYL is they all seem to share this knack—they seem to exude an honest curiosity about things that is contagious. Curry hesitates on a word as she's reading aloud to the kids and says, "Huh! What IS that word? I don't know that word. Does anyone know how to say that? No? Will someone look it up for us? And the kids rush to be the one to open the door to this knowledge for everyone else—it's in Toby's persona—she REALLY wants to know, and she doesn't make not knowing value laden.
>
> Kevin does the same thing. He's one with the kids—they've formed a partnership in which they all WANT TO KNOW. WHAT they want to know intrigues me and sometimes makes me want to laugh because the answer is just about everything. They move from conversations about revolutionaries to neighborhood maps and the curiosity is the constant.

David (Schaafsma, 1996) referred to his experiences and urged that we trust the process:

> I had to trust the process, as you said. Some will flounder for a while and they may need help from you as experienced writer, teacher, of course. But to force your idea of what is important I think is presumptuous of us, finally. Things of significance can be said about most anything, but even what counts for significance is up for grabs, I think.

I suggested that student motivation might be expressed as a formula in which a direct and positive relationship

might exist between a student's "need to know" and a student's commensurate "investment in knowing."

Participants have continued to examine the issues reflected in curriculum development and student motivation. In our listserv conversations, we regularly reference the work of Dewey, Stock, Greene, Freire, and fellow practitioner, Wigginton. We acknowledge for one another the perplexing tensions between designing curricula that address the following:

School district mandates (Kinder, 12/7/95):

> My principal is trying really hard to understand what I'm doing . . . but it's pretty obvious that he would not do it this way. He wants to know how I will lead my writers from the subject-verb-complement sentence to more complex and intricate sentence forms. . . .

Mandated standardized tests (Swenson, 1/8/97):

> The way these conversations overlap for me and address your interest in overlapping Delpit and Freire is that teaching/learning/coming to know are all for me about curiosity. Here's the challenge for me as a teacher: How can I provoke kids' "need to know"? What "Needs to Know" deserve to be prioritized? A [standardized] testing score that could stigmatize a kid has a pretty high "need to know" priority in my book.

Community cultures (Tendero, 2/19/98)::

> One of the things I heard was "there are some things that are just inappropriate for eighth graders to study." The year after I heard this, I went in and talked about what made the "appropriate" cut. Teen pregnancy and sex in general didn't make the cut. Drug and alcohol use, violence and anorexia did.

In addition to our attempts to develop curriculum that would address the demands noted above, we also were attempting to address student needs as they are expressed throughout this work in the form of identified student research topics.

And the teachers (personal letter from Toby Curry, 6/24/96) continued to ponder the pedagogical implications of those choices for their own lives and roles as teachers:

> As you know, the last three weeks have been overwhelming, but I finally feel I'm breaking the surface and beginning to breathe free. I was able to help my kids finish 10 of the 13 research projects we began. Their boards look beautiful and are truly wonderful examples of authentic research. I really love them all. You'll be so impressed when you see them . . . I'm also working on my students' last anthology. I just ran out of class time. We had to make a decision to finish either the research projects or the book by June 12th and we chose the projects . . .

We didn't arrive at the "answer" to heightening student motivation in our conversations. We did, however, extend one another's insights into this issue by sharing our work with one another and by referencing the work and thinking with theorists such as Freire, Dewey, Stock, and Greene. We moved our decision making to a more conscious level, a level in which practice and theory are interwoven.

7. Gathering data and using a variety of formats to learn—surveys, sharing student work, interviewing, etc.

Participants on the WFYL listserv have relied on a variety of methods of sharing data in order to inform their

own and one another's practices and understandings about teaching and learning. We called for data by publishing teacher and student generated surveys on the listserv and by sharing teacher and student work. The listserv has served as a place in which both we and our students could share data across sites.

In one early survey, we asked one another whether we could identify the source of the research issues students were choosing (i.e., whether students first mentioned these issues in their writing, in class discussion, or after reading particular works). Conducting the survey across sites provided us with an opportunity to understand better that although we first imagined that students would use their writing folders as the locus of research into problematic issues in their "lived lives," topics were actually generated in far more diverse ways—often in response to something immediate in the environment, such as an incident at school or a newspaper account of a local problem involving adolescent students.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, external pressures on the network also provided opportunities for data collection that heightened participants' awareness of the diverse

characteristics of sites in the project. In preparing to search for additional project funding, as we conducted a survey to ascertain ethnic backgrounds (see Appendix C) and income levels of students in WFYL classrooms, we invited a related discussion of what difference difference makes; how students do or don't name themselves; and what diversity in project classrooms meant for our network.

Students also made use of the teachers' listserv to conduct surveys. Students from the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit polled other students in order to more fully understand the opportunities and restraints that attending school in Detroit offered compared to student experiences in other WFYL states. Students from Marietta sent to the listserv master copies of their surveys on school violence and how to succeed in school for WFYL teachers to distribute to their students. Although there is no concrete evidence that their work on the listserv prompted other teachers and students to conduct similar work, several surveys did subsequently make the rounds of sites. Sarah, from Kennesaw State University, and two teachers from Marietta, Georgia schools, Carol Davis a language arts teacher, and Mary Miesiaszek, formerly a middle school

English teacher and currently project facilitator in Marietta, started the process with this note (2/11/97):

> Just to alert y'all:
>
> The Dodgen [middle school] students (8th graders) will be working in the next few days on two surveys related to their inquiry topics for this year: random violence and how to succeed in school. (Interesting pair of topics, right?) One of the ways they are investigating their subjects is by seeing what kinds of attitudes different communities seem to have toward these challenges. (In other words, we're interested in what PERCEPTIONS kids have about these topics in their own communities.)
>
> Mary M. will be posting the surveys on the email list. When she does, would you be willing to make Xerox copies and give them out to your students, then mail them to us at the following address? Thanks.

We also shared students' and teachers' creative writing on-line. I (Swenson, 10/24/95) offered these pieces composed by students in Detroit's Dewey Center in response to Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* as an opportunity for teachers in other sites to examine ways students at various sites were responding to common readings:

> I thought you might be interested in a few of the pieces the Dewey Center 6th graders have drafted in response to the HOUSE ON MANGO STREET. Do you see any interesting correlation between the Georgia themes and the Michigan themes?
>
> My Old Home on Wisconsin
>
> When I was younger, I lived in a house on Wisconsin. I had my own bedroom and a house I loved to be at. It kept me warm and it made me feel good, a special place to go when me or my mom was sad. A park across the street when I wanted to have fun but most of

my fun was at my house on Wisconsin with all my toys and all my love. I had to move. My house was gone. Wisconsin was my place of warmth, but nowadays my body is cold. That house on Wisconsin was wealth and heart and intelligence full and I thought they were lost. Wisconsin is where we moved to when I was 2 or 3 years old but all I know is that was my home.

My Neighborhood

In my neighborhood there are crybaby kids and noisy ones (like us). There are two middle-aged ladies always cleaning up their house (I am not saying that is wrong). There are grown-ups always playing basketball hoop. There are flipping kids and running kids. There is an old lady who loves eating candy and loves giving it out (I am always the first one).

My Neighborhood

In my neighborhood, I have people who have guns and people who hit girls with bricks in the eye. Also I have people who shoot other people and kill them. I have girls that are tough and can fight better than a boy. My neighborhood is dangerous. People get themselves killed. People do not like the project we live in.

Many of the students chose to address topics other than houses or neighborhoods—they've written about how they were given their names and seem particularly taken with variation within families—hair/hairstyles, feet, ears, personalities, clothing choices, etc.

And we were interested in the perceptions students shared about excerpts from our writing on our listserv like this observation by Chris (Dewey Center, 11/11/94) on the first year's teacher conversation:

By the way, I was reading through a bunch of these [teacher] responses. I think it looks like a chalkboard of ideas. Everyone can read the issues. I also noticed

> that the writing looks like how you think. That's pretty cool.

In the early years of the project, in Montrose and Marietta, students were logging on and entering information for their teachers while they were in the process of teaching their teachers how to use the technology.

As enlightening as the dialogues were on the WFYL listserv, teachers regularly relied on alternative forms of communication as well—surveys and student and teacher creative writing samples all informed our conversations and our work.

Teachers also drew one another's attention to student writing on the project's student listserv that they thought we should discuss on our listserv. As we saw issues emerging in students' creative writing that concerned us, those issues became part of our conversations as well. For example, broad references to depression and suicide in student writing led us to discuss what teachers' responsibilities are when students in classrooms raise such issues.

Teachers' creative writing, like Debbie's (Kinder, 3/24/96) poetry on her teaching, learning and life, were a highlight for many who felt the overwhelming pressure of teaching well in difficult situations:

And when I got home, there was a letter from the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets saying that the following poem will be printed in next year's Wisconsin Poets Calendar. AND it's going to be one of five poems on the promotional flyer!! Yikes!

Dark
winter
silence
teaches me
to hear the depth
of starlight.

8. Engaging in collaborative problem solving

One distinct advantage of participation in teacher network conversations is the opportunity for collaborative problem solving. One important challenge that WFYL teachers faced was finding a language that spoke persuasively to others—particularly language arts coordinators and administrators—about how WFYL curricula and instructional practices addressed district mandates in various sites: how these curricula and instructional practices coincided with extant curricula, prepared students for standardized test-taking, offered students meaningful school-to-work transition skills, and addressed national English language arts standards.

We frequently discussed how to "weave" the Write for Your Life approach into traditional curricula—we observed that student-identified themes for study could be found in many selections on school- or course-mandated reading lists.

We (Swenson, 2/20/96) also noted that others had demonstrated for us how methods of instruction that invited students to name their own themes and texts also satisfied course requirements:

> There is one section in Eliot Wigginton's (FOXFIRE) SOMETIMES A SHINING MOMENT that always stays with me. The FOXFIRE books have already become a mega-success, but Wigginton is faced with the dilemma of meeting the requirements of the published curriculum. He shows the curriculum [mandates] to the students—lots of emphasis on grammar, syntax, spelling, etc. He makes a chart of the students' names and each of the skills they are to develop in the course. He tells them their "text" may vary, but they are all required to meet the requirements of the school/district. He tells them that if they can't while publishing FOXFIRE, they will abandon the project and revert to the "regular" curriculum. The kids meet the objectives.

We became aware in the listserv conversation that many WFYL teachers, by choice or necessity, were teaching works of literature that many refer to as the "canon." They turned to the listserv either to find ways in which to relate these works to WFYL adolescent health themes or to make them more interesting to students. For instance, when Linda observed in 1994 that given their WFYL work, her students' natural response to their reading of *Streetcar Named Desire* was to raise issues of spousal abuse in their own community, Tony noted that the students might also want to take a look at *The Color Purple* to explore that theme.

When Laura asked for suggestions regarding the use of *Hamlet* in her WFYL classroom, she noted that students had already identified such adolescent health issues as depression, relationships, and violence. She asked colleagues for help with how she might sustain whole group discussion on the work and make it more accessible to her students.

Debbie initiated a subject line, "Debbie's Woes," and described for all of us the way in which her WFYL curriculum and pedagogical approaches were being challenged at her site. Her principal and others wanted reassurance that her students were being prepared to take the vocational grammar test and were learning the skills and material necessary to make a successful transition to further education or the workplace. A similar concern with testing was initiated on the listserv in 1994-95 when one of the project sites (Saginaw, Michigan) was designated a "try-out" site during the development stage of a new writing test that would be mandated statewide. One of the WFYL teachers there observed that she would soon have to stop "doing" WFYL in her class in order to help students draft two pieces of writing that they needed to take in to the test. Another project participant (Jurgens, 12/6/94) from the same district, the language arts coordinator, noted

the promise she felt that project participation offered students—particularly on the first section of the test in which students would reflect on their composing processes on one or both of the pieces they would carry into the test in their portfolios:

> . . . it seems that the writing you are doing for MSU WFYL will be more than satisfactory for incorporation into the portfolio for SPS [the standard proficiency test]. In fact, it has been my hope that it might be the Proficiency paper for any sophomores taking next year's test. Just think of the explanation (on demand [writing] task) they can talk about how they came to write it! Powerful stuff. What do you think?

To which the Linda (Rebney, 12/6/94), the teacher replied,

> Jane, you are right. For WFYL students who have participated in a manuscript day, they have a wealth of information to discuss in terms of their composing process!

Unfortunately, as previously noted in Audrey's (Appelsies, 2/19/96) case with the TAAS mandated test in Texas, not all district administrators saw the connection between the writing students were doing in WFYL and the writing that would be required on tests:

> One issue I am concerned about is why this "type" of teaching is so controversial? Why do [two of her colleagues on the listserv] have to defend themselves to administrators? Why do my lesson plans come back to me with a note from the department head 'After your project is through we need to meet to plan how your students can do more TAAS writing (TAAS is the standardized 8th grade test...) I don't feel like this project will ever be through. It's not a unit of study, but a way of teaching. Who understands me?"

And the resistance came despite the anecdotal evidence being gathered in Detroit and Savannah that students in WFYL classes were doing significantly better—whether because of their curriculum or their teachers—than their counterparts on statewide, mandated, standardized writing tests. Sarah (Robbins, 1/29/96) described their experience this way:

> Just last week our students successfully made it through the Ga. State Writing assessment for 8th grade. We are proud of the way that the Write for Your Life project's emphasis on narrative reflection and the multiple opportunities they have had to write and revise pieces about their own lives prepared them to handle the state assessment so well. The prompt this year had to do with recalling a personal experience that had started out badly but proceeded to some good result. Very, very many of our students were able to recall and "rewrite" a version of one of the pieces they had already composed for WFYL. We had some good discussions afterward about how remaking these pieces involved decisions about genre and audience: how the WFYL texts were originally written mainly for themselves or for the class, whereas the assessment, narrative essays were for "external" "graders," and how that meant reframing the ideas and presentation.

Writing tests weren't participants' only concern. Tony (Tendero, 11/14/96) explained how his role as a collaborator was unfolding and the situation in which Authors Workshop (AW is a middle school site of WFYL in the Bronx which had been threatened with a "takeover" unless standardized test scores, particularly reading scores, were dramatically raised) found itself:

> There are other ways that I see this collaboration happening and my role emerging. One related way, is how I've been listening to what Jennifer and Margo need in terms of their school context. These testing scores are a reality that they as a school are struggling with and as a collaborator, I've been trying to think with them on the ways that this WFYL-type teaching which they value can address the presence of testing. Another collaborative behavior that I hadn't thought of before. Two other ways that I feel like I'm best serving the teachers are in my work in getting the reading resources [here on the listserv] that they might use and in helping with the various grants and proposals that we are writing to try and get funding or forums to talk with people about what we are doing. With my differently configured time, I have some opportunities to do this type of work more efficiently.

Tony's concern was validated by several others and generated this lengthy response that enlarged the discussion to include school-to-work issues (Swenson, 1/8/97):

> Tony, thanks so much for raising the standards/testing/assessment issue(s)again. I think if we can do some meaningful thinking, classroom research, and publication (conference and print) on these issues, we'd be doing a real service to the profession. Public concern with K-U education is not going to dissipate any time soon—and that concern can only drive MORE testing/assessment/cries for external monitoring/control of classrooms.
>
> It feels to me like we're at a crucial point here (during a crisis in public confidence), we can either step forward and attempt to lead or we can keep our focus inside the classroom in which case others will step forward and claim the "public stage," and in the process define for us what they think we should be doing.
>
> Your approach sounds both familiar and sound to me. When I was working on a school-to-work transition project with General Motors, I knew the students would never make it into skilled trades if they couldn't pass the test—and guess what constitutes the first part of

the GM Skilled Trades test? A multiple choice reading test with expository reading selections.

Those who assess the tests told me that the reading test—not the math, spatial reasoning, mechanical reasoning, etc.—becomes the determining factor. That is, more potential GM Skilled Trades candidates fail to make it because they get a low score on the reading test than on any other test component.

I showed copies of lots of multiple choice reading tests to the kids [who wished to become skilled trades certified], and we worked together to define the "common characteristics" of these tests:

What is the length of the average reading selection? Using a common formula (I can give you this if you want—the kids have fun doing it believe it or not), what is the reading level of the excerpt? Is there any way we can categorize the topics selected? The authors whose works are selected? Whether there are headings, bold or italicized type, pictures or graphics? How could we categorize the questions? Could we literally find answers (and underline them) in the text or were they suggested by the text, but we had to create them ourselves? Could we see a pattern to how the questions were organized in terms of those that were explicitly answered in the reading and those that were implied?

After that, they each sat down with multiple trade journals and looked for articles that interested them. They then each did an evaluation of their article of interest—they could use it even if it didn't meet the criteria we established above, but they had to list those caveats at the top of their "tests" (This reading selection [is written at an] 8.5, but the average test reading selection is 11.0). They then tried to create questions and answers to accompany their reading selections, exchanged "tests," corrected the test they had created, and conferenced on the test and responses with the person who took it and [with] me.

Meanwhile, I was campaigning with the UAW/AFL-CIO to remove the reading test from the "big" test, and trying to get the skilled trades people at GM fired up about it—that it in no way reflected a person's potential ability in the field of skilled trades (I could write tons about why I believe this, but it's only interesting if you're into ST or school-to-work stuff).

Here's what I would like to suggest in response to Tony, et al's thinking and planning:

(1) Can we all pool some material? If we continue to share themes, we could make the work of finding non-fiction reading selections less time-consuming by making suggestions for one another—possibly putting pieces right on the listserv if they're short enough. Don't forget that Joan Kaywell's book is a great resource for finding adolescent issues pieces (does anyone still need a copy of this—I have a couple left).

My first suggestion [is to use]: Mike Rose's, LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY, pages 18-22, "Reading My Way Out of South L.A." might serve as an introductory piece to your project—why work on reading and why is it hard for some people? Other suggestions - "An Island of Flight in the Barrio" by Helena Maria Viramontes on Latino/a access to books, Jimmy Baca's "Coming into Language" on learning to read in prison(like the Malcolm X piece).

(2) We could have sites prepare reading "tests" that cross sites. If outside audiences lead students to do some of their best, most careful writing, maybe writing tests from NYC for Savannah might help kids get excited about this??

Sorry to go on so long—obviously a subject I'm concerned about.

In response to which Tony (Tendero, 1/8/97) noted the value of the network and called for additional collaborative work and conversation:

Thanks for your generative response. I am so thankful for these opportunities to chat with you and everyone else. This will give us some stuff to chew on when I visit Friday. (I'm trying to get in some extra visits before TC classes get into full swing.) . . . Anyway, in getting back to your response, I'd be interested in the formula thingamabob that you mentioned. I think that could be helpful for us to think about along with perhaps demystifying some of the aura of the test.

In response to your suggestions:

I've got some stuff compiled at AW already. I'll nab titles etc. on Friday and try to post that. I'll also try out Lives on the Boundary.

> The cross site testing interests me too.
>
> I also want to re-emphasize my interest in hearing how/if people are finding ways of teaching this "culture of power"/Lisa Delpit position that can complement a liberatory teaching/literacy and social change/Frierian position. This combo seemed to be present in your work with GM. Thanks for that example.

and David (Schaafsma, 1/8/97) expressed some of the frustrations of the challenges they faced:

> To come in and do what needs to be done [is the way Tony and I see our roles], as in helping get IS306 to pass these damned tests hopefully within some meaningful contexts . . . to help a kid with his story, as Tony did so yesterday seriously and sensitively and masterfully with three boys writing a collaborative piece.

and again (Schaafsma, 1/8/97);

> Thanks, Janet, for all that help. AW has no choice but to pass the tests, even when they are doing other, demonstrably bright and persuasive research projects and stories. We are just getting underway there and will appreciate all the help we can get along those lines . . .

The continued interest in this conversational thread initiated renewed discussion of student motivation (Swenson, 1/9/97):

> I "heard" two curiously overlapping conversations yesterday: on NPR, a psychologist's essay on a young girl who wasn't interesting in "knowing" flummoxed a colleague who quoted Aristotle and said—"That's what living is all about—our constant need to know to understand. It starts when we're babies."
>
> The other is a conversation on our writing project listserv on the 5-paragraph essay prompted by some of our TCs participation on the NCTE listserv on which many teachers are defending the 5PE. One educator suggested that maybe we're being unduly concerned by the notion of "authenticity" in the classroom—for instance, his

question, "How does my science fiction class fit in with the notion of authenticity?"

The way these conversations overlap for me and address your interest in overlapping Delpit and Freire is that teaching/learning/"coming to know" for me are all about curiosity. Here's the challenge for me as a teacher: How can I provoke a kid's "need to know"?

What "needs to know" deserve to be prioritized? A testing score that could stigmatize a kid has a pretty high priority in my book, so I'd invest heavily in making this a really curious thing for us to study together: Who creates the test? Why? How long have they been around? Who wants us tested? Why? What ramifications does the test have for us? How do we feel about that? How do others feel about that? Exactly what do these tests look like? Why do they look that way? How do people suggest you can optimize standardized test scores. (Oh, yeah, I have a handout on that too—test-taking skills—outsmarting the smarties.

This conversation provoked questions about preparing students for standardized reading tests, writing across the curriculum, and school-to-work transition programs that led not only to the following response (Swenson, 1/9/97) but also to the development of a packet of materials including the pieces mentioned earlier on preparing mock tests and those described below:

When I was working with the School to Work (STW) General Motors project, I had several of the people involved in a graduate class I was teaching (Issues in Education). The class was skewed to meet their particular needs (Sub-title: LAVA: Language Arts in Vocational Areas). The stuff I'm sending was pulled from my materials for that class—there's lots more—I just don't want to overwhelm you:

I'm sending an article "Hiding out in secondary content classrooms: Coping strategies of unsuccessful readers" by William Brozo from the JOURNAL OF READING, Feb 1990. It really helped the teachers I was working

with in the S-T-W program recognize kids who were having problems with the reading and suggests some ways to help them.

Preceding their reading of the article, I modeled a reading assignment based on reading comprehension research—that is, I gave a focusing activity (Venn diagram they filled out based on their conversation BEFORE READING on what they feel are the similarities and dissimilarities between successful and unsuccessful readers), a motivational activity (asking them to discuss the students in their classrooms who might be unsuccessful readers and how they feel about their ability to help those students), and asked them to predict the questions they hoped the reading would answer. They then were given a DURING READING activity—structured note-taking, and an AFTER READING activity—a piece of fictional writing about a student who engages in the hiding out behaviors Brozo suggests and a teacher who uses one or more of the teaching strategies Brozo suggests.

I'm also sending a "Fry Graph" and the "Flesch Formula" for computing readability. Do you know that most computers will do this for you in word processing programs? Computers usually use the Flesch formula. I'm also sending two different "Textbook Usability" scales with which students, teachers, and parents can evaluate how "user-friendly" textbooks are. The teachers used it before adopting new texts.

I really hope I'm not sending more than you want/need. One of my largest concerns as an educator is that we have truly moved into the Information Age/Communications Era. To me, that means the better kids are at processing words, the more likely they are to become gainfully employed. Conversely, if we can't teach them to read above an 8th grade level by 12th grade. . . .

However, when our conversation seemed stuck on the subject of standardized testing, I (Swenson, 1/13/97) felt it important to provide a broader context for our concerns—one that emphasized that current conditions are not so grim as some would have us believe:

Test-mania definitely has us all by the throat. I thought the following might be of interest to some of you [excerpts from Connie Weaver's *Creating Support for Effective Literacy Instruction*, 1996, followed].

Beth (Steffen, 1/16/97) made one final observation before we moved on, temporarily:

I have been avidly reading your conversation about standards and testing, and cross-site test question writing sounds like a great idea. I've mentioned before that we in Beloit are under pretty serious and on-going scrutiny for our tenth grade scores. If Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction weren't in its own fight for its life under Gov. Tommy Thompson's anti-public schools regime, we'd be facing more intense misery than we are. Regardless, my heart is with you at AW [Authors Workshop in the Bronx] this spring as you prepare for the test. I am wondering how the kids are responding to the pressure to perform well. Are they feeling proud and determined or diffident and resistant to test preparation and reading for their lives?

Janet, I loved your comments about the standardized test for the auto plant (was it GM or Chrysler or another?—sorry not to recall) which didn't encompass the skills needed to do the work. As a sidenote, I've just been showing my tenth graders "Who Killed Vincent Chin"—he was the Chinese American engineer who was bludgeoned to death in '82 by a laid-off Chrysler worker who thought Chin was Japanese. Chin's killers were sentenced to probation and a fine of $3,000—no jail. We've been talking about the economy in Detroit and how common it is for people under pressure to find scapegoats for messy and painful social problems—Beloit too is industrial, and Laura's nearby Janesville constantly deals with plant closings or threats of them. Our Detroit talk made me think of all you Michiganians...

Alan (Shinaver, 1/16/97) moved us from tests back to our concern about addressing the national standards for English language arts:

OK, OK, I think I am ready to jump in here again and share a bit of what's going on. In our district we have been meeting as a department to go over the state standards for language arts and trying to match classroom application with the benchmarks set by the state. It has been a confusing and time consuming effort, and I haven't seen a lot of what I'd call real progress. Teachers are getting an awareness of the standards and benchmarks, but I think they are still boggled as to how to make applications in the classroom. Their efforts seem to be in trying to make their traditional methods somehow "fit" into the standards and benchmarks. I have always had difficulty in making concrete correlation between what happens in my classroom and the language of the standards and benchmark documents. My mind just doesn't seem to function that way.

This was semester exam week. I decided to give the state standards and benchmarks to my students and let them explain how we met them through the [WFYL] activities we engaged in this semester. It was their semester exam... read the documents, make notes where you see connections to what takes place in this class, then choose three to ten learning statements from the document and write a paper detailing how the activities met the criteria of the statement. I am pleased with what the students have delivered. They have taken a complex, language intensive document and deciphered it, interpreted its meaning, and responded to it, taking a position and supporting it with examples and details. I am in the process of compiling and typing some of the better responses.

Most of these students did NOT have to do this exam. Our school policy is that if students have three or less absences per semester, their exam does not have to count into their grade. Typically those students doodle through the exam time and walk away knowing that it didn't matter. These students felt a personal investment in qualifying the learning that took place this semester. In fact, to my surprise, after explaining the exam to the class one of my sophomore girls exclaimed loudly "Oh my God! I have been waiting for an opportunity to write about this class!" That helped to take away some of the anxiety I was feeling about giving this "experimental" exam. By the way, she did an

excellent job of making the connections, as did many others.

Certainly the hostility that Debbie and Laura encountered in their school districts invited all of us to confront the particular challenges they faced. When teachers introduce new curriculum and pedagogical approaches—particularly in conservative school districts—they are apt to meet with, at best, questions and, at worst, strong resistance or censorship. Talking to one another on line, we developed ways to represent our practice not only to ourselves and one another, but also to a broader and potentially more critical audience.

9. Engaging in informed dissent with network members

In Chapter 4, I argued that the listserv conversation presented the occasion for those in the project to forge strong bonds between individuals and to build a "healthy" professional network. These bonds were forged when individuals validated project objectives and the value of networking with one another. I've used words such as "collaborative," "collegial," and "caring," to describe their relationships. I suggested that project conversation and work occasioned a strong commitment not only to the project but also to the individuals in the network.

Tony (Tendero, 4/12/96) makes my point in this way:

> I want to be able to teach in the same general place and see you all more regularly. What I wouldn't give to just walk over to Laura's classroom across the hall and interrupt her and Janet talking to offer them some popcorn and begin blowing off work and shooting the breeze.

Debbie (Kinder, 4/2/98) acknowledged the importance of others in the network in her life in this way:

> As soon as I've defined my problem for you concerned listeners, I feel better. I literally write for my life on this listserv, and I often, as I am now, see the screen through tears. And then no matter what happens, I can get through the next day, knowing that you'll help me out. Writing is think, as someone said (source, anyone?) and this works better for my problem solving than talking on the phone.

Real and perceived external pressures on network members strengthened rather than weakened their connectedness and contributed to their construction of the listserv as a generative setting for professional development. In order to look critically at our own work, we needed to be willing to recognize our differences as well as our similarities and to push one another to articulate the rationale for our various positions on issues. Myron Tuman (1992), in his text on on-line communities, *Wordperfect*, has noted that it is particularly challenging to accomplish such sensitive work in an electronic environment: "[H]ow do we promote the anti-

social in a medium designed to promote social cooperation?" (p. 103).

Despite pressures toward hegemony that close social relationships create, I would argue that "healthy" teacher networks, even those located in virtual environments, enable and make "authentic" professional development opportunities possible, in part, because they invite and enable critical examination of their work. In order for networks to remain "healthy," participants in those networks must find ways in which to critique one another's thinking and work without ostracizing or incriminating colleagues.

Nicholas Burbules (1993) suggests that when individuals in dialogue disagree with one another, the dissent falls along a continuum. He claims that participants may reach:

1. Agreement and consensus, identifying beliefs or values all parties can agree to.
2. Not agreement, but a common understanding in which parties do not agree, but establish common meanings in which to discuss their differences.
3. Not a common understanding, but an understanding of differences in which the parties do not entirely bridge these differences, but through analogies of experience or other indirect translations can understand, at least in part, each other's positions.
4. Little understanding, but a respect across differences, in which the parties do not fully understand one another, but by each seeing that the other has a thoughtful, conscientious position, they can come to appreciate and respect even positions they disagree with.
5. Irreconcilable and incommensurable plurality. (Burbules & Rice, 1991, in Burbules, p. 128)

As teachers with different life experiences and work settings, it was inevitable that our conversations would reflect our differences, as our conversations about publishing a manuscript about our work reveal. The strength of our network, however, may be judged in part by our tolerance for our differences. That tolerance was reflected in the continued participation of network members in our conversations even after we voiced our differences. Within our dialogues, we can find examples of four of Burbules' categories of dissent.

1. Agreement and consensus

Two brief conversations, each shared earlier in this chapter, illustrate the way we learned to negotiate meaning. Sometimes a word—like "fear"—or two—like "important stories"—met with some resistance, were negotiated, and led to revised understandings. At one point in our conversation, I (Swenson, 10/7/97) suggested to participants

> Seems to me that you all are either trying to make David and me feel good by saying WFYL has been good for you, or we really have had some unique opportunities from this project (of course the money constituted an opportunity in and of itself). Here's what I think: I think every one of you is scared silly about the threats to children in America. I think you bonded partially out of fear—wherever I teach, whatever grade level, whatever students, these kids are "at risk" because almost (?) all American kids are at risk. We [teachers

and the broader community] haven't created an environment conducive to their flourishing. So, we're committed to trying to do something—to having conversations with other teachers—across settings, across grade levels, across race and ethnicity, to ask important questions of one another: How do you engage your students in their own learning? How do you use the excuse of "schooling" to produce opportunities for kids to figure out how to construct a healthy/healthier environment for themselves? How can literacy support their quests to sustain their lives—physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually?

Audrey (Appelsies, 10/8/97) responded:

> Janet, this may sound picky. I agree with most of what you said except I do what I do with inner city kids because I care about them, I hope that the work that we all do will make for a better future. I like to be with kids, I like to hear what they think, and I think I have a neat perspective on life because of kids. Yes, sure sometimes I get scared or afraid, but that does not motivate me. Positive things motivate me and fear cripples me.
>
> Like I said, this may be picky-but is fear the best word for all of this?

Audrey prompted me to revisit my understanding of teacher motivation and to invite teachers (Swenson, 10/10/97) to articulate for me the reasons for their engagement:

> I like Audrey's prompting that "fear" about what might happen to the children in our classrooms is probably not the best choice of words to describe what keeps some teachers motivated about continuing to engage in "best practices" in general and focus on health-related writing in particular.
>
> **How would some of you respond to what keeps you motivated to think about and do the things you consider to be related to WFYL? You could be teaching in an easier way—working your way through some book—read/write answers to the questions at the end. Why do you do this [WFYL] since it's so much harder?

Debbie (Kinder, 10/10/95) shared with us what one of her students had written in his journal about his initial resistance to hearing about the "morbid stories" of his classmates. Later he had noted that

> The health papers that we read in class were actually interesting. I first thought it would be rather sad and morbid, but it really wasn't. Instead, I got a chance to see how my friends and fellow classmates feel on certain issues. It was interesting to me to see how many people smoke. Also I thought about how I would feel if I were put into a similar situation as some of my classmates have been.

David, however, picked up on this issue of student discomfort on hearing of the health-related issues of their classmates. He shared a story that he had previously published about student resistance in one of his own classes. To which, Debbie (Kinder, 12/16/95) replied:

> Our classrooms offer a chance to talk about real and important issues. No one is forced to tell his or her story, but I think hearing real and painful stories from classmates may be necessary as we learn the true purpose of language which is to tell stories that matter.

David (Schaafsma, 12/16/95) responded by disagreeing with Debbie's designation of the "true purpose" of language consisting of telling stories about "important issues":

> As soon as I decide that [that telling important stories is the true purpose of language] for everyone I am as guilty as any dictator of English. It's being sure of yourself that is the danger. That is what inquiry is

> all about, or inquiry-based classrooms, from my perspective. If you think that all people have to "tell stories that matter" who decides "what matters"? I know I trust you on this: I have taught with you and we share views, mostly. What worries me is when teachers think the most terrible stories or the "deepest" are the best and most worthy of "A's" and they [students] write these stories to please you. Or take a Marxist perspective: a teacher decides that only classroom writing that challenges capitalist thinking will be deemed excellent. I think we should agree on what matters, again, but what about those who don't agree? Your student needs to feel safe about privacy issues; for those of you who are reading this "debate" please know Debbie and I are dear friends for life, and trust we understand each other in these words . . . at least I hope we do!

David, anxious he might inadvertently have offended Debbie, wrote back to say that he was afraid he might have used some inflated language but also couched their exchange as a Freirean/Bakhtinean piece in which they were both "writing for their lives." Debbie (Kinder, 12/16/95) responded: "I sent out my thoughts because "David always helps me rethink. And he is so right about being too sure of anything." She drew the rest of us into the debate by asking, "How to keep everyone comfortable here is the trick here. Anyone have any suggestions?"

Among others, Audrey and Tony responded to Debbie's invitation. Tony indicated that he was excited about the conversation "heating up" and that he too was concerned about issues of "safety and risk" inherent in a curriculum that invited students to name and research issues that have the

potential to "trouble and complicate" their lives. Debbie may have been talking about her students, or she may have been referring to those on the listserv—the question of keeping everyone "comfortable and safe" was a concern of ours as well.

2. Not agreement, but a common understanding

A second area of on-going, informed dissent in the project focused on issues of censorship. As noted earlier, as students named sensitive areas as particularly problematic in their lives—and often the areas of greatest sensitivity related to sexual activity—teachers struggled to understand how to react responsibly to such issues. As we continued to dialogue across differences—across communities that shared striking similarities and just as striking differences—we gained a heightened awareness of how localized censorship needed to remain.

In some districts, parents were well aware that students as young as sixth-grade were sexually active and would benefit from exposure to literature in which other children of a similar age made choices that would be more likely to create healthy, stable futures for them. In other districts, whether the children were concerned about those issues or not, the parents felt strongly that it was inappropriate for

school-sponsored reading to include even intimations of sexual activity.

Although issues of censorship surfaced every year of the project, the following excerpts from the conversation that Laura (Vander Ploeg, 10/23/96) initiated between participants trying to determine how we would set policy for the student listserv was probably the most sustained:

> One issue that came to mind on the unpleasant topic of CENSORSHIP . . . will there be ANY regulation of the student LISTSERV? Should there be? I am wondering about potential problems and liabilities . . .what do you all think?

I (Swenson, 10/23/96) addressed Laura's question:

> Laura, thanks so much for bringing up the censorship issues. I think we have to be really sensitive—and make the kids sensitive—about "audience." We're going to have kids representing a broad spectrum of grade levels and community sensitivities. I think we explain that in this type of "public" conversation, the safest path is the most conservative path—if it might offend the parent of a 5th grader, put it in writing and send it snail mail to the party you really want to connect with rather than the broader audience. You all can argue with me if you want, and I'm open to serious conversation on this before we get started, but I tend to lean on the side of protecting kids. Maybe this is an important class discussion to have. Free speech is guaranteed in this country, and we're not a "foreign" country, but in order to keep audiences engaged in conversation, you can't "slap 'em upside the head" with your language choices and expect them to hang around.
>
> I think a lot of kids are "trying on" behaviors at school to see how they feel. Mediating "voice" for a public audience might be new to a lot of kids. My suggestion: the adult in each class is responsible for giving the "send" command—if it passes your scrutiny, I

> think it's a go . . . you can say things in person to people who know you that aren't appropriate to a long-distance audience who doesn't share your background. What do you all think? Important issue, Laura—thanks again.

But Andy (Fishman, 10/25/96) disagreed with any teacher censorship of student writing:

> This is an important conversation for all of us to have. Our/Diane's students may actually be on-line as I write. I see this as a great opportunity to talk about issues of purpose and audience, to sensitize students to how they will be perceived by the other students receiving their messages and to help them think about presentation of self. I don't however want Diane and/or me to figure in their thinking because that skews the whole experience (making it much more of a Britton-ish writing-for-the-examiner task). I understand the need for us to cover our individual and collective rear; I see it more as a matter of protecting the teachers, though, than protecting the kids. (I'm not sure I see the danger to the kids at all, at least nothing they need to be "protect[ed]" from.)
>
> A brief story on this topic: several years ago I did a study of three 8th grade classrooms in three culturally different schools (public middle school, private Catholic academy, "residential facility for adjudged and adjudicated juveniles" i.o.w. "reform school" if you're my age). We (the teachers and I) instituted a 3-way pen pal relationship, with me as the Merry Mail Carrier. We talked to all the kids about purposes and audience, and about the 2 particular audiences each class had. We did not pass judgment on any of their letters. In fact, we didn't read them until after they were "sent." Not one of those kids ever wrote a word we would have questioned, let alone censored . . . Having said all that, I now realize my current position on this is . . . I vote not to (act as) censor.

I (Swenson, 10/25/96) responded by further illustrating my own position:

> Thanks, Andy, for sharing both your insights and your experiences with cross-site conversations. Last night, I read Debbie's dissertation (WOW! Great stuff, Debbie. Congratulations!) on Write for Your Life. She shares one male students' response to an oral presentation by one of her students who has been a victim of date rape. I can see topics like that coming onto the listserv—and, especially when issues of sexuality are raised—the potential for some damaging things to be said. We can use the damaging remark by a child as a "growth experience" for the whole group, but I'm reminded by a line by Herman G. an 8th grade student of Kevin's who wrote a piece entitled, "How My School Can Be Better." Herman suggests that one role of education is to help kids before they make mistakes as often as possible. I wish Kevin were on this to speak about his letter exchanges in the past. Anyway, let's continue to hash this out—but most likely it's going to be a site-by-site decision.

David wrote back basing a position similar to my own on his past experience. Andy (Fishman, 10/25/96) responded:

> Thanks, Janet and David for your thoughtful responses. I agree this should be site-by-site in terms of final decision. This cross-site conversation certainly helps the decision-making though . . . .
>
> To borrow a line from David, those who know me know I'm certainly neither Pollyanna nor Little Mary Sunshine, but through much trial and considerable error, I've decided that self-censorship in the form of not doing something or trying to maintain perpetual vigilance and control is ultimately counterproductive and destructive for students, for myself, and for this society in which we all live. I would never urge an untenured teacher to walk my talk, but I think those of us in positions to live not only what we believe but what we are intellectually persuaded is morally and ethically preferable should do so. I'm persuaded—and I believe—that someone must. (Could my thinking be colored by a course I'm simultaneously developing and

> piloting for our Writing Project, called "Ethics in the Secondary English Classroom"? Nah . . . I knew I'd eventually get seriously on-line with this group. Guess the button's been pushed.

After additional dialogue in which we were joined by others in the network who referred to their experiences to support their positions, Andy acknowledged that she could see the "political realities" of what we were suggesting, but her own position, which we clearly understood and acknowledged, would remain the same. We disagreed about censoring student writing, but understood it to be an issue in which our ethical and political beliefs often came into conflict.

3. Not a Common Understanding, but an Understanding of Differences

At times we could do no more than recognize one another's differences. In 1997, Jennifer (Tendero, 3/13/97) wrote to describe some concerns that she had:

> . . . I have a few wonderings and concerns I'd like to share—1. My gut instinct, along with remembering what it was like being 13, coupled with the book they've [a group of her students] chosen to study, which is a book about what happens AFTER you get pregnant and doesn't so much deal with preventing pregnancy, is that these girls are fascinated with the concept and idea of pregnancy, while simultaneously adamant that they [don't] want that to happen to them. If I'm completely honest, I'm worried that they're not as afraid of it as I'd like them to be. Truly, if you live in the Bronx, you've got to be might[y] repulsed by and scared of the idea of teen pregnancy in order not be become pregnant yourself. And when something like teen pregnancy is so much a part of your reality, and cynically, your legacy, when your mother and your sister and your sister's friend and,

> your cousin have all had babies, what's so repulsive about that? I guess I'm trying to explain the impulse to study this book as a whole group, when the focus of the group has been preventing teen pregnancy . . .

And I (Swenson, 3/13/97) responded with my own concerns:

> . . . I'd like to express my gratitude for the opportunity Jen has offered us—in my opinion, she has initiated a critical conversation for those of us in the WFYL project. We've had conversations focused on this issue before, but I don't think many of us feel comfortable yet with the issue of teacher stance in a dialogic, inquiry-based classroom that focuses on the health and well-being of the students there-in. I'd summarize one of the issues Jen raised (and please respond and tell me if I've misinterpreted your comments, Jennifer) as "When children lead potentially problematic lives, and those potential problems become the focus for their classroom literacy activities, how can we be assured we aren't making the problems worse by inviting them to use classroom resources (time, materials, teachings—including teacher interest, enthusiasm and help) to focus on them?" Teachers are powerful people in children's lives and their decision to "validate" reading, writing, discussion and research topics sends a powerful, yet often implicit message to children about the centrality of the issue on which they are focusing. In this case, I think Jen is prompting us to think about the EXPLICIT and IMPLICIT messages we are sending to children when we invite them to use the resources we control to investigate adolescent sexual activity. . . . Their [teachers'] decision to NOT send a message is as powerful as a decision to send one. Their silence is as eloquent and powerful as their speech . . .

I felt Jennifer had raised an issue that had surfaced repeatedly—What *is* the role of the teacher in the classroom to lead and guide students? I responded with my own concern that sometimes silence is a more profound and powerful "action," than any step a teacher takes. I made my case in a

long—my longest—message to the listserv. In it I suggested that in an era of AIDS, if sexual activity has become the topic of study, the critical issue is not just the morality of pre-marital sex, but the life-threatening potential consequences of unprotected sex. I argued that a teacher who does not provide students who are discussing sexual activity that leads to pregnancy with frequent warnings about the relationship between unprotected sex and AIDS was putting them at additional risk.

Tony (Tendero, 3/18/97), who works with Jennifer and with the group of students responded:

> . . . I respond with the long history of mutual love, respect and admiration between Janet and myself (indeed all of us at AW). I also know I've always found these types of moments with friends to be the places where I learn the most about myself as a teacher and human being.
>
> I appreciate, Janet, your multiple parts [participant, co-director, mother] in the conversation and, I do admit after your first response I felt (to quote Paul Buckman who was trying to avoid admitting any sense of consternation on "Mad About You") "a tiny dollop of critique in a big bowl of loving support."
>
> Now, I'm all for loving critique, However, I'm also for trying to develop as much of a picture as possible through looking at the perspectives of the people involved. Most of what I write here is that attempt to develop a fuller picture . . . .

Tony followed with a more detailed account of the work at Authors Workshop, including evidence that the girls were

pursuing information to support their desire to *not* become pregnant. However, he also noted that

> . . . this positive direction [in which students might be headed] seems (from my experience) to not integrate into a student's life without that student realizing some sense of agency and power. I've had plenty of students just do my "Do Something" project and not actually internalize any of the positive direction that they had been studying. Playing with that catch point seems to be at the heart of what we're discussing here. . . .

I understand that Tony wants students to develop a sense of power and agency so that they will act on the lessons they learn from their research. I argued for a more active role for teachers in students' learning when students' lives are at stake. Tony and I understand one another, respect one another, admire one another—even, and—this matters—when we disagree. We understand—and accept—our differences.

4. Little understanding, but Respect

All of the teachers in the WFYL Project appear to hold one another in high regard. We share similar goals. On occasion, we choose to reach those goals via different paths. One area that distinguishes individual teachers in the network is discipline. Different teachers discipline students in different ways. Audrey invited others to define their positions, and Beth (Steffen, 4/22/98) was the first to respond:

Audrey, a note of encouragement on the discipline issue—I don't have much to offer because I hate formalized, institutionalized Discipline and rarely have anything to do with it—whenever kids are "bad" the goal seems to be to get them to control themselves so they and their peers can learn—creating a confrontation which accuses them of wrong doing and charges them with the need for Respect [which] is such as waste of energy—a tense exchange of who said what to whom prompting disrespect from whom to whom ensues . . . yuck! What kids need is self respect before they can respect anyone else, and mandating it in a hostile situation is counterproductive . . . so have fun with your faculty meeting—keep us posted on what happens

Alan (Shinaver, 4/21/98) voiced a similar position:

I have to agree with Beth here. Formal discipline policies as I have experienced them only serve to create more hostility. Believe me I relied on that type of "support" for many years before I discovered there are other ways, not as immediate, but much more enduring. I suppose that those policies are needed for staff who see no other way and are resistant to self change. I have learned to "adjust" my own behavior to assist students in making adjustments in theirs . . . Many of my peers won't buy it. They can't believe that I "let" a kid talk to me like that . . . Well, I didn't "let" a kid talk to me like that . . . I listened to a kids who was frustrated, hurt and defensive and tried to get to the underlying cause.

But Kevin (La Plante, 4/24/98) disagreed adamantly:

I agree that "institutionalized " discipline policies can create many of the problems the group is wisely drawing to our attention, but these policies are a fact of life just as much as standardized test scores. In a perfect world we wouldn't need laws either.

What we have to do is try to make them work for the students as much as possible. When I say students, I mean all students. Too often these debates focus so much energy on what happens to the "bad" kids or the ones who suffer the wrath of the policy and we underscore the reason the policies were put into place in the first

place. The majority of the students want a quality education, they are respectful, and they play by the rules, and just a few troubled ones in any class can greatly interfere . . . They need consequences, immediate and severe.

. . . In my community I owe it to my students to teach them how to appropriately respond to authority figures, particularly, in the case of my African-American males. Incidentally, my principal, who is black, agrees. Maybe the cop is racist or wrong in his actions, but back-talking him or refusing to cooperate is likely to get a flashlight upside his head, a la Malice Green. That is wrong, but it's reality. Learning how to deal with conflicts respectfully may save their lives. . . .

And Beth (Steffen, 4/25/98), while respecting Kevin, could not acknowledge an understanding of how his approach would be generative for students:

. . . As all of us do, I draw my ideas of discipline from experience. Like Al, when school starts in the fall, I am confronted by a whole lot of kids whose behavior is not the ideal—in fact whose behavior wears me out. I suspect if I used institutional discipline support to call on administration to punish the wrong-doers, to send them packing to ISS (in school suspension) to do manual labor to learn the consequences for their actions [which Kevin proposed], 60% of my students would be gone, early on. I guess what I want from students is the same as what you want, Kevin, students who have coping skills to survive with some integrity in the "real world" which doesn't have a lot of mollycoddling for poor, loud-mouthed, sometimes minority (though as often as not my troublemakers are white—males and females) crass, ignorant skill-less punks.

The only think I would perhaps disagree with is that the way to get skills for the "real world" is cleaning up the school [Kevin's idea]. I don't want bad kids to be educated to be janitors—most of the "bad" kids I know are pretty bloody bright—they direct their smarts to being smartasses, sure, but rather than teaching them to pick up litter, I'd like to help them

> learn to use their smarts on their own behalves—through writing, reading, and intelligent, civil discussion with those who are different . . .
>
> I never Demand Respect—it's not my temperament. Val, whose "pottymouth" got her summarily sent out of every other class she had last semester, I took her aside and told her she was too bright to be carrying on with such nonsense. Of course finding out her mother and she engage in brawls every night—physical fights which led the mother to chase Val around with a knife (Val's dad was in prison for shooting a man in the face and for raping Val's sister), and that Val was getting into physical fights with a 30-year old woman in her neighborhood--helped me understand her temper, her lashing out. Now Val's sob story is a dime a dozen. How many of those stories can we compile on top of each other, playing one upsmanship about who works with the most abjectly unfortunate or miserable children? the point is NOT to use that background as an excuse—to say—"Poor Val." Sigh. "Her life is SO hard that we should excuse her bad behavior." No way. Understanding a kid helps a teacher or an administrator empathize a little . . . give the kids the respect he or she insist he or she is entitled to and insist the children cut the crap and speak and write with coherence and intelligence rather than swaggering defiance. It works for me because I believe it will. Where our convictions lie colors what we do well, eh?

And we did have moments that appeared to be moving us to Burbules' fifth-stage, "irreconcilable and incommensurable plurality," such as this one, when Kevin (La Plante, 11/14/96) decided to "take on" Tony and standardized testing, and in the process, adopted a rhetorical tone and voice that I worried many would find offensive:

> Tony, the emphasis [by others] on standardized tests and reading is a valid concern [not something we should protest]. . . . I teach students how to be successful on those tests as an ethical matter. Students need to pass those tests if they are to make it in the

> academic arena. Those who balk at that reality obviously have forgotten their history. They had to be test wise once upon a time to make it to the educational level they are at currently. Simply put, in a rich, student-centered, and inspired learning community, these tests (writing and reading) are the bare minimums of expertise that is being obtained . . . We are a joke as professionals if we don't [prepare students for the tests] . . . Well I don't want to spew on too long. I suspect we will do enough of that [at our meeting] in Chicago . . . As for anyone who wants to debate this further, even supplying a few specifics (what a novel idea) I will be available in Chicago . . . [but] leave the educational jargon at home.

At moments like these, for the sake of the network, I felt compelled to mediate positions. In response, therefore, I (Swenson, 11/14/96) offered an excerpt from the chapter "Entering the Dance of Conversation" from Gordon Pradl's (1996) *Literature for Democracy*, which was, on request, distributed at our Chicago meeting and became another primary resource for the project:

> Through our words, we display our respect for what the other knows and feels. By seeing our talk in terms of POSSIBILITIES, rather than CERTAINTIES [caps mine], we come to understand that the way we speak, as much as what we say, has real consequences for students, who are constantly weighing and choosing among alternative linguistic representations of reality (p. 104).

I went on to add:

> I think of all I don't know about teaching and feel greatly humbled—and greatly hopeful to think of what I stand to learn from the rest of you. Thinking of my early years of teaching, I'm reminded of the lyrics, "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." Sometimes I miss the certainty of youth, but I realize if I am to continue to make good use of the lessons you

> have to teach me, I have to suspend any urge toward dogmatism I might feel and be open to the possibility that you each bring with you to Chicago. Thank you in advance for your willingness to share what you think, what you do, and what you hope with the rest of us.

Certainly, when dissent surfaced between network members it raised feelings of discomfort for all of us. Although we held differing opinions on censorship, the role of "classical" literature in the curriculum (whether there should be a "core" group of common readings), standardized testing, methods of disciplining students and even the role of the teacher in the classroom, we challenged ourselves to find ways in which to voice our disagreements that would keep us in conversation with one another. Although almost all participants indicated on their reflective surveys that they felt free to offer dissenting opinions, we did have different comfort levels at those times:

> I have definitely felt free to disagree—especially after meeting the other participants and talking with them face to face. (Sparks, 1998)

> Yes (I felt free to disagree), I feel as though we respect each other and can speak pretty honestly. (Kinder, 1998)

> Yes, but I believe there is a cultural norm that we are supportive of each other which tends to mitigate against disagreement. Kevin seems most willing to disagree. . . . (Fairbanks, 1998).

And Kevin (La Plante, 1998) identified himself as one quite willing to disagree:

A hearty yes, I reply. I must give myself credit for that. I'm not afraid to speak my mind regardless of the setting. I don't care if my views are PC or 100% consistent with some educational philosophy. I try to have well-informed and carefully constructed opinions, but I tell it like it is. Thankfully, I'm not afraid to change my mind. I know I'm growing, so why sweat it? I can that my blue-collar upbringing for this courage.

10. Learning in Depth Around Important Issues Including Contextualizing Broad Reform Issues to Particular Schools, Students & Contexts

During the first five years of the project, participants have raised some issues annually in the project listserv conversation. As a reader will note by surveying the project bibliography in Appendix E and the listserv citations embedded elsewhere in this text, we have studied in the texts of others and in our own classroom practices such issues that influence adolescent health and well-being as teen violence and gang membership; adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases; relationships with family members and friends—including issues relating to peer pressure; anorexia, bulimia, and body image disorders; substance abuse; gender discrimination, racism, homophobia and related equity issues; and the influence of poverty on adolescent lives. In addition, we have explored issues of censorship, grant writing, and funding of educational initiatives, school reform, multiculturalism, and issues

influencing philosophies and pedagogies of English language arts practice.

One complex and multi-faceted issue that has continued to perplex and intrigue us is the issue of power. Many—perhaps most—WFYL teachers have read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of Hope*. Early in the project, teachers decided to encourage students to use their developing literacy to move toward social action in order to create healthier surroundings for themselves and their peers and in order to witness their literacy working in the broader community. However, our reading of equally informative texts such as those by Elspeth Stuckey, Lisa Delpit, and Jonathan Kozol validated our observations that that improved literacy does not always translate to increased power and control of one's life, that such variables as race and socio-economic class play more significant roles. Still, we were committed to doing all we could to create experiences for students in which they could practice using their literacy to engage purposefully and meaningfully with their surroundings in ways that were mutually beneficial.

Several episodes that directly affected WFYL students in relatively quick succession heightened our awareness of and sensitivity to issues of power. In 1995-96, a group of

students in Debbie's classroom indicated that they found their school inhospitable and oppressive to students, and, citing school lunchroom policies as one of many examples, they researched the policies of adjacent districts. After gathering sufficient data to document their claim, they collaboratively drafted a letter to the principal—amid discussions of "audience" and "diplomacy"—and asked him to consider a lunchroom policy more consistent with surrounding districts. Not only did the principal refuse to respond to the students either in person or in writing, but the teacher came under scrutiny as a result. Almost simultaneously, high school students in Janesville requested the recision of a lunchroom policy that mandated they sit in alphabetical order in the cafeteria. Their letter met a similar fate.

During that same academic year, the talk show *Geraldo* filmed an episode in Janesville, home of the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, in which the host was assaulted by Janesville Klan members on national television. Appalled at the reputation their city and by association their school was developing, Janesville WFYL students explored issues related to racism in their school and community and culminated their research project with a research paper, composed as a letter, asking that the school district recognize Martin Luther King

Jr. day as a school holiday as a means of generating publicity that might counteract the negative press the community was receiving. Once again, administrators refused to respond in any fashion to the student request.

Debbie (Kinder, 11/24/96) under increased scrutiny from her principal recounted a meeting in which the "literacy as social action" component of her curriculum was being summarily discounted and instead she was asked to explain how her "lower level" Career English WFYL students were being prepared to pass the grammar test given to vocational students:

> The meeting went as I expected. The administrators let me talk; I don't know what they heard. My "skin-the-cat" [he insisted there were other, better methods than the ones she was using to achieve the same ends] principal seems angry that too many kids are signing up for my class [next year] "for the wrong reasons." Career English is one of three electives offered to seniors
> . . . He's not buying the grammar-in-context idea at all anymore, even as an alternative way of skinning the cat. I have caused him a very difficult scheduling problem, and if he can assign me to required courses, he won't have to deal with too many sections of an elective.
>
> The assistant principal could only talk about writing memos and technical manuals . . . when I talked about all the other job skills gained in our classroom community, she shut down.
>
> The director of instruction SAID conciliatory things, but when I mentioned the open campus letters as a positive learning experience and asked whether he had heard about them, his reaction suggested that this had been a major topic of discussion at administrative meetings. I am in deeper trouble than I realized. He and the assistant principal read the [favorable] student

evaluations, but didn't comment on them. He thanked me for the preparation I had done for the meeting. The principal wants me to administer the grammar test given by the nearby technical school, hoping to prove that I'm not teaching what our tech school students need.

Then the bell rang and I left to teach for two more hours. They stayed to talk about me, I imagine. I don't expect to hear anything more from them.

The good news is that when I thanked my students for their supportive evaluations, they wanted to come to my meeting and pressure the administrators. . . .

I'm sending a letter of application to our local college this weekend. . . . Anyway, this is enough of my woes. I hope someone will propose a new topic of discussion. Thanks for listening. I needed you all. . . .

At that point, Laura (Vander Ploegh, 4//96) implored her WFYL colleagues:

As I read your latest letters [Debbie], a knot grew in my stomach, and tears came to my eyes. It makes me so angry to think that your success with kids is rewarded with suspicion and hostility. I suspect that the letter your students wrote to the principal was, as in my situation, a much more dangerous move than we all had imagined. If that action, a meaningful attempt by students to engage in discussion with those who have authority over them, is seen as subversive; if your advocacy for your students is perceived as a "problem" that needs to be addressed. I cannot understand how you (or I) will continue to teach kids to write for their lives. How can this happen? I fail to understand where these kinds of attacks are coming from or how people can justify them in the name of education. . . .

. . . Kids know they aren't being listened to or respected by adults; we know that listening to kids can be perceived as "subversive;" I am wondering why so many people are afraid to listen. How did this happen?

Things have quieted down for me in Janesville lately . . . I've decided to lay low for a while and not keep him [my principal] informed of anything he doesn't absolutely NEED to know. I made a proactive move last week also and wrote letters to the parents of all of the kids who were involved in the grant writing. Several

> kids mentioned getting them; one girl, Megan, gave me a present and wrote me an amazing letter. I felt, for the first time in a while, like I was appreciated. I think it will go a long way. . . .

Laura, having witnessed first Debbie's students' failure to achieve "power" to influence their surroundings with their literacy, followed by her own students' similar experiences questioned our foundational belief: Can we ethically continue to suggest to our students that as they use—and through use develop—their literacy skills they will be able to make changes to their environment that seemed meaningful to them?

Our notions of power were further complicated over the next two years as mandated, standardized testing became more of an issue at every WFYL site. Test results had different implications for students and teachers at different sites. Some teachers' very jobs were at risk if students didn't score well. Some schools were in danger of being taken over by an outside entity. Some students could not graduate from high school or earn "endorsed" diplomas without passing the tests. And the tests varied dramatically in terms of how well a WFYL focus and approach prepared students to take them successfully. The words "codes of power" worked their way into our vocabulary, particularly as Tony working at Authors Workshop, which was under threat of "take over" if the

students didn't dramatically raise their multiple choice reading test scores, questioned how we would merge our beliefs in a Freirean approach to curriculum development and Delpit's exhortation to prepare children to address the codes of power the broader society endorses.

Participants also questioned their own power: What did others say about issues of power that influence students and teachers? How had teachers' literacy empowered—or not empowered—them? Should they advise students that the "pen really is mightier than the sword"? Could or should teachers try to divest themselves of power in the classroom? Should they attempt to empower students? How? To what extent? With whom else was power to be negotiated? School reformers? Parents? Who would/should have a voice? What has "power" meant in WFYL classrooms?

The following excerpts from our dialogue, suggest the ways in which we studied issues—particularly issues with implications for re-formed practices in schools—in depth.

Audrey (Appelsies, 9/3/97) noted:

> Thank you for sending the issue of Rethinking Schools about social justice. Yesterday was the first day of school and I asked my students if they had ever heard the word democracy. Nope.
>
> Then I asked, "Do you think you are old enough to participate in decision making?" An interesting first conversation began.

As far as this being [notion of curriculum as] autobiographical I believe I am just beginning to test/try/figure out what it means to have a democratic classroom. What bothers me the most is that I am not able to participate in decision making at my school. The administration doesn't work that way.

Therefore, in reaction to feeling so powerless in my building I try to remember that feeling when I work with my students. It's not easy, but I am trying to act on my beliefs.

Anyone have any suggestions about how to continue to build the group, the shared decision making. . . . What is a socially just classroom to you? Any words will help keep me focused!

And Beth (Steffen, 10/6/97) observed:

Kevin mentioned student violence in an earlier message. A lot of my students are fighters—one girl didn't come to school last week because she and another girl had been chasing each other around in the middle of the night with knives—I keep trying to suggest that making an argument with words is more powerful and substantial than popping someone with a fist or a bat. I'm not making a very effective persuasive statement, though, trying to get them to write state prescribed persuasive essays. But we'll slog on tomorrow.

Tony (Tendero, 10/10/97) pointed us all toward a resource:

I'll see you face to face today Laura, but I'll probably forget this later. You wrote about possible work with language and power issues. The September issue of Rethinking Schools is guest edited by Lisa Delpit and ? focusing on Ebonics. . . it's titled Language, Power and something. (You realize exactness is a strength of mine). It looks great and might be generative in classrooms. David might have extra copies or folks might pick it up. Janet do you have a copy (copies) that could be distributed?

And Beth (Steffen, 10/12/97) logged on again to commiserate with Laura:

Lovely to hear from you [Laura]. Good luck as you settle into your new school and your new school's culture. Audrey wrote a bit about her class last year, and others have talked about some of their difficulties with student behavior—talking about what goes badly is harder than talking about our successes, but geez, the bad times are more instructive in the long run, if we can just live through them and get to the other side for perspective...

I know what you mean when you say that starting to build a relationship with new kids is enervating—for the first seven or eight weeks this year I went home each night feeling the next day would be starting over from scratch too—so depressed and worn out I didn't know where the energy would come from. Every year, with every class I've had, there is an ongoing battle to establish the fact that we're (the students and their teacher) in whatever happens together, that what will happen during our class is up to all of us.

There is always, early on, a HUGE power struggle in which I push responsibility for classroom activities, thought, discussion, writing, reading toward them and they try to refuse it, insisting that school is not for them, that they hate it and want no part of it. There is always rudeness, surliness, & even occasion blatant disrespect. Maintaining equanimity and addressing every child with patience and courtesy is exhausting, but in order to de-center myself as the broker of power, there's no choice. They can't be there to learn or to read or to write or to behave because I tell them to; they have to come to be there because they want to be—because what happens matters to them.

Stamina and endurance and persistence, so far, have paid off, and students become acclimated to the dynamic of our class largely through immersion in reading past students' (and other WFYL sites students') writing about their lives and in the letter exchange with Platteville—in both cases the traditional teacher/student power hierarchy is non-germane. Students are interested when their issues have a place in the classroom, and slowly but surely, they come around.

Audrey (Appelsies, 10/13/97) excited by an outside resource, shared her experience with us:

I have so much to say. Do you mind listening?

I went to a University of Wisconsin alumni gathering to hear Gloria L. Billings the author of "The Dreamkeepers"-successful teachers of African-American children. It was fabulous. Have you read the book? David and Tony- do you know her? Her talk was called "believing they can fly." Her observations/concerns about schools--

1. there's a hostility toward kids who don't come to school reading
2. some children's' language is devalued (i.e.-what is wrong with "these" children and "these" parents?)
3. teachers fail to employ critical reflection on issues of race, economics, and politics...

Her research showed her that successful teachers had the following underlying principals-

1. intellectual leaders in the classroom had the toughest personal lives (<u>these teachers invite these kids to use their street power in the classroom as intellectual power</u>) (she made a curious point here about African American. Am. males)
2. students are apprenticed into a learning community
3. students real life experience built the curriculum********:
4. I love this one...especially at my school where we use the Success for All reading program....Teachers have a broad conception of literacy
5. collective struggle against status quo
6. teachers understand the gap between students' lives and world...and think of themselves as political beings and see themselves as "<u>the cultural brokers between reality and the culture of power</u>."

At the risk of sounding like Janet :) how does this play out in your schools. Do you think other teachers view themselves in this way...I think all of you are acting on these principles.

In an attempt to relate Audrey's comments to earlier ones, I (Swenson, 10/13/97) noted:

> When I think of who teachers are in children's lives, it makes me realize why many of us are willing to work in such inhospitable circumstances—we enjoy the personal gratification of the affection, respect, and often admiration of the kids we teach. I know we can all name kids who never came to love us, but you know what, modesty aside, I bet almost every one of us would say, more often than not the kids in our rooms like us. Some want to be "adopted" by us. Some want to "become" us. Some want to become friends after they leave our classrooms.
>
> I think one of the pressures of teaching is realizing the power and authority that are somehow tangled up and entwined—whether we want them to be or not—with the title "teacher." Every choice a teacher makes in the classroom, seems to me, to send both an explicit and implicit set of messages. In the universe of things that could be taught, the teacher, if he or she in not constrained by a system's curriculum, identifies what will be taught and what resources will be used in the teaching.
>
> In WFYL, we've tried hard to divest ourselves of some of that power, we've tried to use the children's themes—emerging in their writing and conversation—to *help* us select the direction of the curriculum. But...there is still a selection process going on, isn't there? That means someone—probably each of us—is making a decision regarding whose themes will be fronted and whose won't.
>
> Teaching as a political act. We have beliefs, we have values, we enact curriculum. We affect kids' lives. Wow. Wow. No wonder we have trouble sleeping so often!
>
> Seems to me, the value of a listserv discussion like this is the opportunity to try to make what is implicit in our teaching, explicit, and a place for exploration.
>
> I think of the silly tests that are given to preservice teachers to see if they are ready to teach—largely basic skills and content knowledge tests. I am repeatedly stunned by the complexity of all we do. These conversations are a gift—thank you all.

And Tony (Tendero, 11/2/97) extended the conversation:

So many things to chat about. . . I'll toss out a convoluted "exploration."

One of the things that interests me comes out of what Janet said in her Sanctioning message. "Teaching as a political act. We have beliefs, we have values, We enact curriculum. we affect kids' lives."

As I think more about WFYL and our conversations, one of the significant dimensions seems to be about power. Kevin and Janet seem to be working around this with the dinner party and the dream team test. E-valu[e]-ation being the power to determine who is ready to teach.

Another that power seems to reside in the project, seems to emerge with Beth's students' letter. In that form, they seem to be determining their own "test" of "was this useful?" Simultaneously, they are writing (to borrow Lisa Delpit's term) in a code of power. A formal letter. Damn fine one at that. In this way they seem to add a dimension to Janet's statement of we "affect kids lives." They seem to be moving towards affecting their own lives. They seem to not only learned the codes of power. . . they also might be working towards affecting the distribution of power in the ways that power affects some of their interactions concerning homosexuality in the classroom and perhaps in the larger community.

As I work in these dimensions of power, Janet's "Wows" raise the need to consider the ethical and moral impact of the choices I make. And to me, Kevin's concerns about the community's and his comfort level, remind me of how teaching is done in the social context. These self-reflective moves with my teaching are vital. And given my experience in Virginia, these moves are constantly in use.

But I can't help wondering, if at least some of what Janet wrote is true, "Here's what I think: I think every one of you is scared silly about the threats to children in America. I think you bonded partially out of fear—wherever I teach, whatever grade level, whatever students, these kids are "at risk" because almost (?) all American kids are at risk" then shouldn't we be finding opportunities to find and use power to act with kids to address these threats every chance we can? There also seems to be an ethical and moral impact of not making choices. If I don't act when topics like "all

gays should be rounded up and shot," I think I would have trouble sleeping at night? Even more importantly, if my students have chosen to act upon this through literacy, and I don't do anything about this, I will lose more sleep.

I am a man of little sleep, I admit. And in this uneasy rest, that's what so important for me about what is happening in Beth's classroom. Action and literacy by kids with help from adults. That's the most valuable part about this project for me.

I realized I've strayed from both the teacher test stuff and the homosexuality stuff. But at the same time, I think there is a thread that I'd love to talk more about in relation to tests and power and our project. And I suspect, Beth's students have a lot to teach me about writing for my life. (Tony, 11/2/97)

The conversation triggered a response from Grace (Brewster, 11/2/97):

You're right. I am scared to death of some of the issues that affect my kids. They bring so much baggage to school with them, it amazes me that some of them find time to learn. I also worry endlessly about my kids who seem to be lost to the world of school. They absolutely do not care if they are successful in school or not, at least on the outside. It can be disheartening, as a teacher, to watch 11 and 12 year olds who have given up on themselves and their future so soon. One of my girls mentioned that very problem in our WFYL meeting last week. While we were looking at some of the good and bad things about our school and our class, she raised her hand and said, "People give up too easily."

I see the power in WFYL in that it gives my kids ownership of their learning. When the kids realize that they have the power to make a positive change in their lives, the hope for the future comes back. Right now mine are having difficulty believing that we are actually going to take some of the issues that we've been talking about and DO something with them. If even one of my kids who sees no purpose in school can be engaged in learning, exploring their literacy in ways which they deem useful, all the hard work is worth it. I can't wait until we start seeing some action with our issues. The kids need it and I need it to keep all of us from giving up in an overcrowded education system which sometimes drives me nuts.

And I (Swenson, 11/2/97) reflected on the last several entries:

> Wow. Tony. Wow. I think you've given us all a lot to contemplate.
>
> "Teaching as a political act. We have beliefs, we have values, We enact curriculum. we affect kids' lives." And we find ourselves embattled. E.D. Hirsch and William Bennett have beliefs and values and also want to tell us what curriculum to enact so that we affect kids lives in ways that are more consonant (or so they believe) with the beliefs and values they have. They want us to teach biblical stories, Greek mythology, great Western works of literature.
>
> Parents seem to me to be confused—of course they want their children to be physically and emotionally safe—that has to be a first priority with all parents. They also want their children to become independent so they can die in peace—knowing the children can live without them—that means they have to be prepared to earn an income that will allow them that independence.
>
> If these presumptions of mine are correct, where do we fit in and where do Hirsch and Bennett fit in? What beliefs and values do we hold in common? What beliefs and values are not held in common? Who has had and will have the power to dictate and enact curriculum? Who should?
>
> [copy of Tony's previous note from "I can't help wondering…to That's the most valuable part of this project for me."]
>
> Wow, Tony, wow. Kids and power. Teachers and power. Literacy as power. Bureaucrats and power. Parent power. The power to control teacher certification. The power to dictate curriculum, pedagogy, resources. Power to change communities. Power to control our own destinies. Power to change our communities.
>
> I'm struck by Grace's comments—the young woman's remark—some people just give up too easily. I'm reading the "old" listserv conversation—all the entries titled "Debbie's woes," and I'm having a hell of a hard time writing. I just want to give up. Sometimes, fighting what each of us personally defines as "the good fight"—the fight that will keep kids invested in their own learning—which is the only way they will/can learn, which will keep them safe from harm, which will

> restore/give them faith that they can have a healthy, productive future—sometimes the fight just seems overwhelming. Sometimes the teaching ranks seem to look a lot like "David" looking at Goliath, and I'm still looking for the slingshot that's going to deal the deciding blow — the blow that, in my mind, will keep the e-value-ation of education in the hands of professional educators—educators willing to be informed and influenced by those outside their professional ranks—but not dictated to by them.
>
> Thanks Grace and Tony — for encouraging me to stay up a little longer and write a little more —I don't want Grace's student to say of me, "She gave up too easy."

Professional Development at The Point of Need

In these last two chapters, I have argued that the WFYL teachers used the occasion of their listserv conversations with one another: (1) to construct a "healthy" network in which they regularly validated the purposes of the network and networking itself; (2) to develop patterns of leadership and a community they perceived to be supportive, engaging, and stimulating; and (3) to develop methods of responding to external pressures that drew them closer together. I have further argued that our listserv conversations, in addition to establishing and sustaining a generative network, also offered participants a site in which the characteristics of what others have named as "authentic" teacher professional development were evident and led to deeper and broader understandings of students, curriculum, classrooms, communities, schools, teaching, learning and themselves.

I have suggested that authentic teacher professional development for English language arts teachers who are in service, such as those in the WFYL network, have a strong desire for professional development that is deeply contextualized and offered "at the point of need." I have demonstrated ways in which teachers are learning in the service of their immediate needs as teachers evaluate ideas and methods by immediately applying those they feel are useful. I've also demonstrated that professional development offered in this manner is respectful of teachers and teaching by acknowledging the complexity of what teachers do. Unfortunately, too many teachers have come to believe that faculty in university settings and "trainers" in other teacher preparation agencies do not understand the constraints under which they work. Too frequently these professionals fail to acknowledge the resistance teachers encounter from colleagues, administrators, students, community members, and those who determine the resources to which the teachers will have access. Colleen (Fairbanks, 1998), an English educator at the University of Texas, Austin, in responding to how the listserv has benefited her, used the work, "rarified. . . ." to refer to her position in the university and WFYL as a "grounding" experience. Those of

us in English education teach teachers, but we teach teachers who in turn teach their students, and these are complicated times for the students who enter their classrooms. Times that complicate whatever notions teachers have about how best to facilitate students' literacy development. The following excerpts and exchanges taking place on the listserv as I have been completing this dissertation, help to complicate our understanding of the settings in which teachers teach.

In this one week exchange—an excerpt from the conversation—we will find participants articulate their needs and goals for their students and themselves. They offer and evaluate resources and responses to one another; express and validate each other's professional work; examine their teaching and learning; and engage in problem solving. In addition, they affirm the reasons for and goals of the WFYL Project, the advantages of networking. This particular WFYL listserv conversation served to link educators from six states, teaching students from fifth-grade through university graduate students in a learning community in which they were are simultaneously teachers and learners.

Audrey (Appelsies, 3/31/98), 5th grade teacher, Minneapolis, Minnesota:

> Today I really could have used an extra set of eyes and ears in the classroom. I had been so looking forward to today and don't know how to sort out what happened.

Can you help? We've come to the point in American history after the War of Independence, and I wanted to open things up and have the kids do an inquiry project. I wonder where to start. How does justice, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness apply to them as Americans? What does it mean to be an American? . . . I just don't know how to do this. Here I am trying to open up the curriculum, to build a curriculum with the kids . . . on issues in their lives . . . but I don't know how to even guide them. I don't know what we are looking for. Or do I? I think I sound like I am afraid of what I/we will find out? Do you think so? . . . their writing seemed to be focused on guns (why they are around), drugs (why they are around for kids) . . . Any help would be so very much appreciated.

Alan (Shinaver, 3/31/98), high school teacher, Saginaw, Michigan:

May I chime in here? It seems that you are in a perfect place to have your students begin to design their own utopian society. They already have a pretty good idea of what their current society is, and what its faults are. This is a favorite part of my curriculum. After discussions of how they see society today, I tell my kids that they are "The Creator" (take it how you may) with the ultimate power to create their own world. We begin with a two-column journal entry of what they dislike about society in one column, and what they would include in a "perfect" society in the other column. Then they share their lists with peers and add or delete as they wish. Next they are to produce a brochure to advertise their new world. I offer a wide variety of materials, but no prototype. We do discuss what might be important to include in their brochures, but I try not to "steer" them to any particular "this is how it should look." Many are surprisingly inventive. It takes about a week to complete the brochures, which then go on display for all to look over. They have created their own worlds and feel ownership of this "place."

Once the new worlds are in place, I then group them into small groups of five and tell them that together they must combine their separate worlds to form a "new nation." How will they deal with language, currency, laws, flags, etc . . . and again they will have to

present this new nation to the rest of the world (class) but this time it will take the form of a class presentation. Another brochure? An infomercial? A travel video? Possibilities are endless. Again I give them a week to complete and present.

On the third week, I secretly select two "loyalists" who will be my tax collectors. As the students enter the classroom they are issued play money and a list of edicts that govern the new world which I have created by overthrowing all of their governments and becoming a supreme ruler. They had to pay a tax to sit down, a tax to speak, a tax for pencils and paper, a tax for speaking without permission. Of course the tax collectors are exempt from these rules, and eagerly collect from anyone who breaks the laws. While under my oppression they are to write an editorial about the events that led to the dictatorship, and must somehow figure out a way to gain their independence. It hammers home everything that they had just learned, and they put to use the concepts that they gained through the history lessons. When they finally come up with their own Declaration of Independence, I am prepared to have an Independence Day party with them. It is a lesson my kids never forget, and one I greatly enjoy teaching.

Usually from here we begin to get serious about individual rights and what can be done to better the community in which we live. Does this help?

David (Schaafsma, 4/1/98), university faculty, New York City: "So great, Al!!! What this listserv was designed for, yes!"

Janet (Swenson, 4/1/98), university faculty, East Lansing, Michigan:

I agree—this listserv has been a great place to share teaching strategies (thank you, Al, for this most recent—brilliant—addition, and Kevin, you might want to chime in here with your revolutionary war unit—I think you referred to it previously), and I think it's served other purposes as well. What do you think? Has the listserv served additional purposes for you . . . beyond sharing your practice with others and learning about the practice of others? Some of this has surfaced

in other conversations . . . Beyond sharing teaching strategies, practices, methodologies, has the listserv conversation served other purposes for you?

Audrey (Appelsies, 4/1/98):

Well, the listserv has saved my life more than a few times. Most recently was today when I kept checking my computer and wiping my tears as I struggled and struggled with my students to open things up. This listserv is so important because when (usually) I don't have anyone in this building who "understands" or can "help" me with what I am trying to do, I have you all. The conversations, the presentations, the constant classroom windows have made this a very safe place for me. To think that I can write one day that I am afraid, and could you all help me and [then you] send me long responses and encouragement overnight is profound. I also think it is amazing that I, as a newish classroom teacher, have access to very, very experienced and well read people
. . . I know we have been through this discussion before but . . . it matters . . .

Audrey (Appelsies, 4/1/98):

I just had a chance to re-read/read Debbie, Kevin and Beth's conversation from the beginning of the week. Debbie—I just can't believe what you go through down there [with resistance from administrators]. You are so gutsy. I'm lucky that my principal "likes" me and what I am doing. Beth, I am struck by the kinds of readings you can do with your students and the types of conversations that take place. At first I thought, wow, their situations are so different than mine, but that's not the case. I think we are all searching for that back door that will give us an opening to work with all of our students.

Debbie (Kinder, 4/1/98), high school teacher, Platteville,

WI:

Audrey, you are amazing. You said exactly what I feel about the listserv. It doesn't matter whether we have 2 or 22 years of experience. We need to be supported at every stage of our teaching careers. When I

hit bottom periodically, I plan to go home to my computer to talk to thoughtful, progressive educators.

As soon as I've defined my problem for you concerned listeners, I feel better. I literally write for my life on this listserv . . . Writing is thinking, as some said (source, anyone?) and this works better for my problem solving than talking on the phone.

And Audrey, I got goosebumps reading about [your student] Mitchell leading your students. Listening to your kids and helping them define and focus their questions has always worked for me. Trust them and believe in their respect for your trust . . .

Audrey (Appelsies, 4/2/98):

Last night I wrote a response to Janet's survey. I loved the question that I think was about what those of us who write on the listserv are about. I wrote that we are questioners, passionate, like to write to help us think and sort out what is happening, we are insecure at times about what we are doing and we need support. Janet—need I say more? Debbie and Al's comments today totally support what I said . . . This definitely helps me feel less alone.

Andy (Fishman, 4/2/98), university faculty, West Chester, PA:

Help?! I'm looking for a solid, provocative quote about slaves and literacy to tweak my freshman comp. students. They are unbelievably—intolerably—complacent about literacy and literacy issues . . .

To address Andy's needs, Audrey (Appelsies, 4/3/98) quotes from Lester's "To Be a Slave," from "Slave Ship to Freedom Road," from Douglas' *Autobiography*, from Paulsen's "Nightjohn," and from several other poems. Five other teachers log on to suggest literacy quotes.

Alan (Shinaver, 4/3/98):

Tears . . . So many days I cry on the drive home from work, releasing the emotions that built up over the course of the day so that when I arrive home I've let lose of most of it... As I greeted my first hour Freshman English class, a young lady that I have been working closely with this year handed me a paper she had written. She said nothing, just handed me the composition and went to her seat. I began reading and my emotions were immediately triggered as she spoke of her depression early this year, her attempted suicide. And her relationship with her father, all of which built up to a descriptive account of the night this past January when he died of a massive heart attack.

I was almost through the last paragraph when another of my freshman girls from second hour came to me at my desk, her body trembling and tears streaming down her face. I set the composition down on my desk and stood to comfort her. She had been having self esteem problems all year, and I thought maybe she was coming to me to help her avoid getting into a fight again, but I was wrong. It was worse.

She pulled back her hair and showed me the welts on her right temple, then pulled up her sleeve to show me the welts along her right arm. Her mom's boyfriend had beaten her and kicked her out of the house last night. She stayed with a friend. The tardy bell hadn't even rung to signal the beginning of first period yet. I quickly ushered her in to the counseling office and brought in the one counselor I knew would help us get through this. As I left the office feeling that she was in good hands, I walked straight into a fight between a boy and a girl, gripped in a headlock, pulling hair and slamming each other's face.

I pushed myself in between them, struggling to separate them, as other adults came to assist. They were pulled apart, and I continued toward my classroom when I was approached by yet another student that I have been working with for two years now. She had been in a fight with a girl two weeks ago, both had returned to school yesterday, and we held a [peer] mediation [a program Alan's WFYL students had developed through grant proposals and professional training sessions] between the two of them at her request. Today she was panicked because the assistant principal had her scheduled for a parent conference because he heard that the mediation was unresolved.

I had been at work a total of 15 minutes. I was now in a crisis situation. Overload. In my [student peer] mediation program, I have a debriefing session with each of my mediators before they return to class to allow them to release any concerns and to let go of whatever emotions they held [in check] during their mediation sessions. I help them to let go, to not own it. I don't have that for myself, and I need it. Occasionally when I feel the stress beginning to build I will talk with the counselor and dump as much as I can, so that I can go on. Sometimes it just isn't there for me though. Today my counselor was working with my student. Many of my peers would consider it whining if I were to share my need to "dump" with them, or they would feel that they had to "offer advice" rather than just listening. So, I'm with you Debbie this [listserv] works when there are so few other options available.

I'll make it through this, and my students will survive, and our program will continue. I guess what you have done for me, Debbie, is give me the "OK" to open up to others on the listserv and have some confidence that there is understanding here, that I may not be considered a whiner in this forum. In the past I have usually refrained from publishing this to the whole list and privately confided in Janet, with whom I have great confidence and security.

I needed this today. I needed it bad.

Janet (Swenson, 4/3/98):

Dear Alan and All, Oh, my heart aches for you. Today I've been preparing a "sample lesson." I need to teach a one-hour lesson to a group of pre-service teachers as part of the interview process I'm going through for a position in the College of Ed at MSU. Things keep floating through my head that I'd like a chance to share with them—the hardest part is thinking about only being with them one hour. I want to tell them how excited I am for them that they've chosen this career—that as a veteran of 27 years of teaching, I can't imagine a way I'd rather spend my life. I want to encourage them to think about what important work this is they're about to take up—surgeons deal with the physical well-being of their patients—teachers deal with the physical, intellectual, emotional, financial and social well-being of their students. Sometimes it

can seem SO overwhelming and other times it is SO rewarding. I can't imagine a better way to spend a life than investing it in children.

But because so many of the students in our classes live on the "boundaries" of war zones, it seems there are constantly land mines and an opportunity to become "shell shocked." Kevin, remember the time you were driving to school and you stopped to break up a fight, and the kids explained why someone should keep beating an adversary even after s/he is helpless? Remember the perverted logic of it all (so the person can't come back with a gun later and kill you)? Hearing that changed me—I was "eating on the streets" again, David. Remembering that kids often live places I've never lived and that I've always got to try to stay open to understanding. I think of Heather in OK moving into her school's [crime ridden] neighborhood, and I can see all the wisdom in that , but I don't know if I'd be strong enough to do it. How are you doing, Heather?

I think of all the challenges—the ones I'm aware of—that each of you has faced and my heart feels like it weighs 50 pounds. Then I look at the picture of Sunkrea [from the Dewey Center] by my computer. Here's what she wrote to me after I participated in her writing group and wrote a piece about my grandfather and my naming that was prompted by reading and responding to her story:

> Dear Mrs. Swenson, Thank you very much for the trip [to MSU] and for using my story as a reference to your story. I really truly enjoyed coming to visit. My mom said she appreciated the suggestion that you and the group gave to me. My mother read your story and she said it was very nice and sweet to write a story on your grandfather, but anyway thanks I really mean THANKS. Sincerely, Sunkrea.

If I didn't have those real and mental notes and pictures of the good times stored away, the bad times—the days like Alan is having today—would be just too overwhelming. So, Dear Al, I wish you memories that flood your brain—memories of that grantwriting workshop that resulted in the Peer Mediation training that results in another grant and even more funding and an even more developed [schoolwide peer mediation] program and even more students cared for and served . . . and

all because you, Alan Shinaver, care so much for your students. Picture those faces, Al, picture those Sunday meetings. Take care of yourself, Al, so you can keep taking care of the kids.

Alan (Shinaver, 4/3/98):

Janet, thanks for the memories. A lot of good has come from some pretty desperate times . . . On my drive home I am already thinking and planning strategies for Monday, trying to put aside the impending bureaucracy of the protective service report, the new fears this child will face with legal strangers poking and prodding into her life, and my own lack of confidence in the system to protect her.

Janet has heard this remark before, but once again I am asking myself, "How did I get here from teaching English?" I often wonder how much longer I will be able to do this. It keeps getting bigger and more involved with each new term. I guess the bigger question that keeps me doing what I do is "How can I NOT?" There is no way that I could know, and not do something.

Pam (Morgan, 4/3/98), university faculty, Towson State, Maryland:

I read often, but seldom find time to respond—I even print messages with the intention of reading them at my leisure and responding during the same (needless to say, I've found little leisure lately J).

I was intrigued by the subject line for this series of messages ["Lives on the Boundaries"] thinking that you folks were discussing Mike Rose's book—was I surprised to discover the intense content of the exchange. Of course after reading your message, Janet, I had to go back to read Al's message that launched this discussion. I had no intentions of crying today, but like Audrey, I must admit that the tears did well up in my eyes.

Al's message reminded me of my days as a senior high school English teacher during an era when it seemed all the suicidal students were choosing to confide their intentions to end it all in me and my learning to tell them that it was not fair for them to confide such grave information and expect me to keep the secret because I

cared too much for them. Consequently, I frequently found myself in the middle of conferences with troubled youth, their parent(s), the counselor, and the assistant principal. I found myself quietly thanking God that those days were behind me now that I am a university faculty member . . . (Les Brown) responds to the rhetorical question, "Why me?" asking "Why not me? Who else is better suited to handle this situation at this moment in time than me?" So I challenge all of us, myself especially, to contemplate daily, "Why not me?" .. .PS As intense as this little detour may have been, thanks so much for the reality check!

Kevin (La Plante, 4/3/98), middle school teacher,

Detroit, Michigan,

Al . . . your description of the first fifteen minutes would sound so unbelievable to anyone but a teacher, and that's exactly why we need to "dump" on each other from time to time. I feel for you, Debbie, and everyone else who have days that can bring them to tears, but at least you're involved. You're in there fighting the good fight; you have not been so desensitized that you do nothing. I comment you for that.

Jennifer (Tendero, 4/4/98), middle school teacher, New

York City:

. . . You are all heroes, I mean it. It's difficult to see that when you're in the thick of kids' lives and struggles and curriculum and testing and hormones and schedules, but when you get outside of those things, as I have recently [by doctor's orders in bed until impending childbirth], you see clearly how important this work is, how human and sweaty and vital it all is. Let yourselves realize that when you become sad and run down. Be gentle with yourselves, please, and see you from my point of view—magnificent teachers!

Debbie (Kinder, 4/4/98):

> . . . We all do what we can and think about ways to do it better. Writing about this process works for us and it works for our kids . . .

Audrey (Appelsies, 4/7/98):

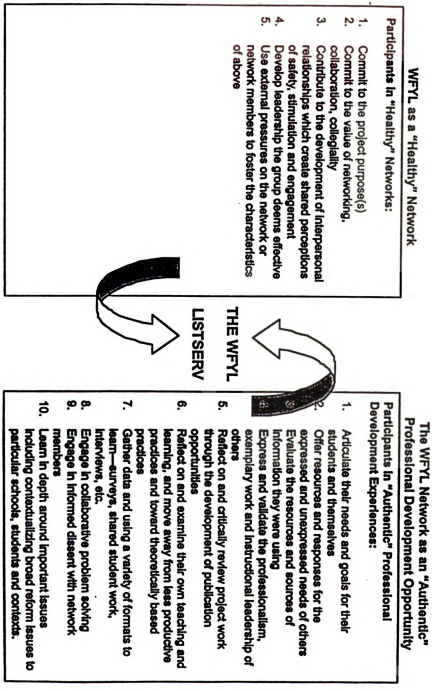
> Things have settled down a bit over here. Last week was really intense, wasn't' it? I think my students are coming around and I found out I am going to loop, or keep them as 6th graders I think I feel a little less pressure about [contemplating] this [inquiry] project. It will be like laying the groundwork for next year. I really appreciate all of your support last week.
>
> I was talking to one of my colleagues here and we were wondering why we cannot support each other very well here and why I continue to turn to my listserv buddies . . . do any of you have good support in your buildings? What is that like? How does it develop? What can I do to establish those types of relationships here?

Meaningful reform in education at a national level as well as meaningfully re-formed practices in individual classrooms will take into account the "universal truth" that these teachers bring to our attention: Teachers teach in particular contexts with particular students that create particular demands on them that they have no choice but to address. That fundamental truth—the particularity of teaching in unique contexts—has implications for how they will teach as well as how they want to continue their own professional development. Healthy networks offer authentic professional development opportunities for their members by developing methods for allowing teachers to embed their new

learning in the context that demands their attention and energy.

In Figure Three, I represent graphically the characteristics of healthy networks and authentic teacher professional development that have a synergistic relationship with one another. I have argued that the teachers involved in the WFYL project used the electronic dialogue journal that they shared to reflect on and critically examine their own practice and understandings as well as to reflect on and extend those of one another. I have argued that "housing" the professional development opportunity for these teachers in a "virtual" time and location allowed the professional development and network building activities to be available "at the point of need" rather than on an arbitrary, pre-scheduled basis. I would also suggest that a virtual location provides teachers with opportunities to learn while they remain deeply embedded in their own teaching, even as they are engaged in dialogue with those in far different settings from their own—thus enriching their understandings of what it does mean—and could mean—*to be a teacher*.

Figure Three: Developing a Healthy Teacher Network and Authentic Professional Development Opportunities on the WFYL Listserv



Notes

[1]See, for example, Allen's *It's Never Too Late*; Ayers' *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* and *City Kids, City Teachers*; Fletcher's *Walking Trees*; Heath's *Ways with Words*; Kohl's *36 Children* and *I Won't Learn from You*; Nielsen's *A Stone in My Shoe*; Paley's *White Teacher*; Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; Schaafsma's *Eating on the Street*; Villanueva's *Bootstraps*; Vinz's *Composing a Teaching Life*; Wigginton's *Sometimes a Shining Moment*; and in collections of teaching narratives such as Jalong and Isenberg's *Teachers' Stories*; Ladson-Billing's *The Dreamkeepers*; Logan's *Teacher Stories*; Rankin's *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher*; and Rose's *Possible Lives*.

[2]See, for example, Atwell's *In the Middle;* Branscombe, Goswami and Schwartz's *Students Teaching, Teachers Learning;* Daniel's *Literature Circles*; Hillock's *Research on Written Composition*; Macrorie's *The I-Search Paper*; McCormick's *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*; Newman's *Interwoven Conversations*; Root and Steinberg's *Those Who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching*; Rose's *Possible Lives*; Singer's "Responding to Intimacies and Crises in Students' Journals" (in *English Journal);* Swenson's "Grant Writing: An Alternative to the Research Paper" *(*in *Democracy and Education);* Wigginton's *Foxfire* and *Sometimes a Shining Moment*; and Wilson's *Attempting Change*.

[3]See, for example, Apple's *Democratic Education*; Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*; Bruner's *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*; Coles' *The Call of Stories* and *The Plural I*; Dewey's *Democracy and Education*; Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*; Greene's *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*; Heath's *Ways with Words*; Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and *The Schools We Need: Why We Don't Have Them*; Phelan's *The Politics of Performance*; Routman's *Literacy at the Crossroads*; Schaafsma's *Eating on the Street*; Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner*; Sizer's *Horace's Compromise, Horace's Hope*, and *Horace's Schools*; Stock's *The Dialogic Curriculum*; Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*; Wells and Wells-Chang's *Constructing Knowledge Together*.

[4]See, for example, Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*; Kaywell's *Adolescents at Risk*; Kiritz's *Program Planning & Proposal Writing: Introductory Version*, various works of adolescent literature.

[5]See, for example, Bing's *Do or Die*; Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*; Kozol's *Amazing Grace, Death at an Early Age*, and *Illiterate America*; McCall's *Makes Me Want to Holler*; Paley's *White Teacher*; Prothrow-Stith's *Deadly Consequences*; Rodriguez's

Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.; Rogers' *A Shining Affliction*; Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; Shakur's *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member*; Silan's *Sex, Death and AIDS: Willful Ignorance in the 90s*; Thomas's *Free to Be a Family*; Vopat's *The Parent Project*; West's *Race Matters*; and Wheeler and Baron's *Violence in Our Schools, Hospitals and Public Places: A Prevention and Managment Guide*.

[6]See, for example, Goswami, et al's *Nearer to You*; Jody and Saccardi's *Computer Conversations*; Monroe's *Writing and Thinking with Computers*; Sullivan and Dautermann's *Electronic Literacies in the Workplace: The Technologies of Writing*.

[7]The works of such theorists as Antinarella, Asher, Check, Cochrane-Smith, Darling Hammond, Elmore, Grolnick, Hawley, Kegan, Larson, Lewis, Lieberman, Little, Lytle, McLaughlin, Miller, Sparks, Valli, Wasly, Warren, and Wolfe suggest that "teacher networks" are generative sites for teacher professional development.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Electronic Dialogue Journal

> Technological expertise has taken over; things are done *to* people or *for* them; apathy and passivity increase . . . . there is talk of emancipation and "wide-awakeness," of the need to transcend passivity. Transcendence has to be chosen; it can neither be given nor imposed. It is my view that persons are more likely to ask their own questions and seek their own transcendence when they feel themselves to be grounded in their personal histories, their lived lives.
>
> Greene, 1991, pp. 1-2

> Coming together to determine what is possible, teachers may discover a determination to transcend.
>
> Greene, 1991, p. 13

> To explore a medium, to work with it, to try to express something seen or felt or heard is to come to understand, on some level, that visions are made real when they are transformed into perceptual realities and given intelligible form . . . . What is important is the effort to define a vision and to work on giving it expression . . . . To know how to attend to such realities is to open oneself to altogether new visions, to unsuspected experiential possibilities. It is to become personally engaged in looking, from an altered standpoint, on the materials of one's own lived life, and imaginatively transmitting (from the fresh standpoint) the fragments of the presented world.
>
> Greene, 1991, p.187

In the dialogue that closed Chapter Four, Alan Shinaver queried, "How did I get here from teaching English?" Where was "here"? "Here," that day for Alan, was an urban high school in which he felt it necessary to respond to the social, emotional, and physical needs of his students as well as their academic ones. "Here," was also a virtual place on the listserv where he could share his day with trusted colleagues. And, in the process, to paraphrase Maxine Greene, he could also transform his teaching experience into

perceptual reality by giving it intelligible form, by defining a vision and giving it expression, by opening himself to new visions, by using those visions to examine the materiality of his lived life. On the WFYL listserv, Al joined his colleagues in becoming chroniclers and critical analysts of their own and one another's teaching beliefs and practices, not at some predetermined day and time or focused on a predetermined theme, but at "the point of need," when events and questions were fresh and pressing—when the "need to know" seemed greatest, most compelling.

If Al is representative of a good many English language arts teachers in this country today, he entered the profession of English education because he enjoys literature, and he probably also likes to write himself. He finds these language arts productive and meaningful, and he wants to share his enthusiasm and expertise about them with students. If Al is like many other teachers, he studied at a college or university to prepare himself to teach a subject, *English*, and then began teaching that subject to find that he is teaching not only English, but also *students*, adolescents, increasingly diverse adolescents from increasingly diverse communities, living in increasingly challenging circumstances. Al's "reality"—the place in which he finds himself as an English educator responsible for the transmission of information and competencies and for the further intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development of complex human beings—has implications for

- What, where and how he and his colleagues might find "authentic" professional development opportunities and for
- How he and other teachers respond to English educators, to those who propose to offer them opportunities to improve their practice.

In writing about ethnic minority students who have been historically disenfranchised in academic settings, Patricia Lambert Stock (1997) has observed that a substantial body of literature about the retention of minority students in higher education reveals that successful approaches to teaching ethnic minority students work because they value

> what students know and what they bring to the educational setting; because [they engage] students in experiential learning, group learning, and peer mentoring; because [they take] place in a learning situation that is rigorous and supportive, respectful and friendly; and because [they blend] the academic and the social (Brown; Higgins, et al; Justiz, Wilson, and Bjork; Lang and Ford; Stock; Tinto) (p. 23).

Not only are many WFYL teachers working with minority students (see Appendix C) using methods they hope will engage students in formal and informal learning opportunities over the course of their lives, but, I would argue, many WFYL teachers themselves often feel disenfranchised by institutions to which teachers historically have turned for their own continuing professional development. They too benefit from formal and informal learning opportunities that are grounded in experience, that take place in groups of similarly-engaged peers who may serve as one another's

mentors. They too benefit from learning situations that are rigorous and supportive, respectful and friendly, that blend the academic and the social.

Too often, teachers are professionally marginalized by "experts" whose theories "de-skill" the teaching profession as they advance "teacher proof" materials, mandated curriculum, standardized testing, and whose rhetoric demeans teachers' work. The authority enjoyed by such experts and their rhetoric does little to encourage teachers to value their well-meant guidance or to embrace their pre-formed solutions to teachers' problems because their wisdom is usually not based in classrooms like the ones teachers occupy.

During the last five years, WFYL teachers—like students who have often found their academic experiences at a far distance from their lived lives and perceived needs—have taught and learned from one another in conversations. In these conversations, they have shared their prior knowledge and experiences; they have mentored one another as they "tried on" and de-briefed new practices and philosophies; and they have integrated their professional and social lives in a professional community that was at once respectful and friendly, demanding and rigorous. These conversations might have occurred in face-to-face settings, but the fact that they didn't, that they occurred in a virtual setting and time had implications for how teachers experienced them.

The Electronic Dialogue Journal: An Authentic Teacher Professional Development Opportunity

Some of the discussions in which on-line WFYL teachers engaged were not distinctly different from those they might have taken up in more traditional in-service workshops or graduate coursework—except that they were conducted *on-line in a virtual context and for an audience that was as close and well-defined as it was distant and amorphous*. Similar to experiences they might encounter in other professional development settings and opportunities, teachers read and discussed educational philosophies and pedagogical practices. They shared beliefs and cited the work of others. They took "notes" and wrote "argumentative essays." They took turns "listening" to others and contributing their insights to the on-going dialogue.

Other of the experiences in which on-line WFYL teachers engaged were distinctly different from those that teachers experience in face-to-face settings. These experiences, I believe, were shaped by the genre in which they developed, in what I have come to call an electronic dialogue journal. Having examined WFYL teachers' listserv conversations and found in them substantial evidence of generally-accepted characteristics of "healthy" teacher networks and "authentic" professional development, I found other characteristics as well. In naming and describing these characteristics now, I also intend to point to future research that I plan to

conduct and that I believe worthy of others' research. In the WFYL listserv conversation, I observe evidence of

- Professional development grounded in teachers' localized contexts, immediate experiences, pressing concerns; shaped at the point of need,
- Sustained professional reflection addressed to the audience of self and other, audiences positioned to benefit from the same reflections,
- Integration of teachers' personal and professional selves in formative rather than formal discourse and
- Reciprocal translation of global educational concerns to local practices and local practices into global educational issues,

Professional development grounded in teachers' localized contexts, immediate experiences, pressing concerns; shaped at the point of need

A critical feature of the electronic dialogue journal is that it offered teachers—those teachers who had access to computers, modems, Internet service and colleagues who had formed an inquiry community—opportunities to examine aspects of their profession on a timely basis. Teachers named the subjects of inquiry and focus for themselves and one another, and these foci emanated directly from their particular contexts, personal teaching practices and beliefs and their needs.

One need only review the headers on the listserv log reports to note that those in university settings had greater

access to computer technology, particularly when the research began five years ago, and they had greater access during their normal working day. K-12 teachers logged on regularly during their evening hours and weekends, a situation that speaks not only to constrained access, but to the commitment these teachers made to their own and one another's professional development. On occasion, K-12 writers would draw their colleagues' attention to the late hour of the night or the wee hours of the morning in which they were writing and note explicitly that the conversation was sufficiently important to them that they were willing to sacrifice sleep and leisure time in order to participate.

Looking across these electronic mail "headers," including the time zones in which they originated, one might note that there were few times during which an individual needed to wait more than a day for a response—and, more often than not, several responses arrived within a twenty-four hour time span. When teachers expressed concerns that ranged from maintaining student engagement in research projects to better understanding the relationship of standardized testing to student literacy development, from responding to a hostile administrator to the identification of texts that would support student inquiries into fairly new areas of research, and from sharing the joy of student success and engagement to sharing the despair of student resistance; reflections, responses and suggestions arrived in a timely fashion that allowed them to pertinent rather than merely academic,

Sustained professional reflection addressed to self and other, audiences positioned to benefit from the same reflections

In the quote that opens this chapter, Maxine Greene suggests that individuals might "awaken" from their daily ennui and seek transcendence beyond their current understandings by articulating questions that emanate from their own lived lives. When Al asked, "How did I get here from teaching English?" he was re-marking and reflecting on his day. Because he was recording his reflections in a public place in which others were expected to comment upon one another's entries, he joined others in metacognitively thinking about his thinking and in consciously workshopping his beliefs and practices.

Many of those who see promise in a movement to position teachers as researchers of their own practice have noted the inherent challenges of creating time either during hectic teaching days or in the context of teachers' demanding lives to record those classroom episodes which they consider worthy of "re-marking," in order to reflect upon them in some systematic way and, in the process, of making teaching a more conscious—or "wide-awake" endeavor, one that speaks to Schon's concern that effective practitioners often know more than they can readily say about their profession.

Perhaps because teacher isolation is now a well documented phenomenon, solitary journaling may be viewed as another manifestation of the less desirable aspect of

teaching. The electronic dialogue journal, however, because it does embody some of the characteristics of conversation—subject initiation and responses and repetitions from the "other" in turn-taking format—seems to invite regular teacher participation. Yet, unlike conversation, the entries *were* solitary compositions drafted without the potential of interruption from the intended audience, and thus potentially offering more opportunity for reflection than a "real-time" conversation might.

Because the listserv conversation was a powerful invitation to communicate with colleagues, it encouraged teachers' to make the time to log on and communicate with one another. It also appeared to invite a certain meditativeness. WFYL teachers often began or ended postings with the phrases, "I was just thinking . . . " or "I was just wondering . . . " or with a self-deprecating comment regarding the potential difficulties they had created for readers because the message they had inscribed was speculative in nature, was "just thinking aloud."

Although teachers often appeared to be writing primarily to make sense of their days for themselves, they also alluded to their need to contribute to the dialogue and to hear from others. Whenever readers/writers were absent for more than a week or two, their "re-entries" usually began with ritual apologies and explanations for the lapse in their participation. WFYL teachers seemed to have clear expectations for one another to "log on." These expectations

prompted regular contributions to our individual and the common journal.

Even when we declared we were writing for ourselves, we were inviting others to read over our shoulders. Although Tony Tendero, for instance, noted that he was using his entries as his teaching journal, since he chose to post his journal in a public place, his colleagues assumed an invitation to comment on its contents. These remarks requested additional information, identified parallels with particpants' own teaching and teaching situations, and highlighted what was unique in other settings and approaches. Respondents also doled out a fair amount of praise and empathy, encouragement and suggestions, responses that might well have created even more of an impetus for contributing to and reading the conversation.

A default feature in the WFYL listserv program returned senders' messages to them as well as to others. Contributors not only read the postings of others, but they were apt to reread their own postings as well. The feature of the listserv encouraged recursive reflection, reflection in the presence of others' dialogue, others' reading, others' thinking.

WFYL teachers' individual and collective reflections on their practice—made possible by the technology—led me to recall these words in Hargreaves and Fullan's (1992) introduction to *Understanding Teacher Development*:

> Critical reflection will not take place if there is neither time nor encouragement for it. Teachers will

> learn little from each other if they work in persistent isolation. Creative experimentation with instruction and improvement will be unlikely if changes are implemented from the outside by a heavy-handed administration. (p. 13)

Not only was the electronic dialogue journal available to WFYL teachers whenever and wherever they were able to log onto computers and modems, not only was it available at the point of individual teachers' need, whatever their schedules or time zones, but teachers would always be able to find company there, respondents, responses, conversation.

The conversational flow of the entries seemed to encourage participation and diminish a sense of isolation. The sharing of experiences and perspectives fostered "creative experimentation with instruction" that emanated from fully particularized and contextualized settings.

Working in this new genre, teachers, as Maxine Greene suggested they might, struggled to represent their experiences and thinking in "intelligible form," to "define a vision" of both what is and what might be in their own and one another's classrooms. Because the listserv constituted a dialogue rather than a lecture, and invited teachers not only to remark upon our own experiences, but also upon those of colleagues as well, each of us was offered "altered standpoints" from which to view our teaching.

Integration of teachers' personal and professional selves in formative rather than formal discourse

Although Al might have recorded his question, "How did I get here from teaching English?" in his personal teaching

journal, instead he chose to post it on a listserv which he knew had twenty-five contributing readers. Al's question might be understood as both personal and public—he obviously wasn't looking for an answer, the question appears rhetorical, yet he might well have been looking for responses. Al observed that there are many with whom he would be unwilling to share details of his day because of their anticipated reactions or responses. He noted that he told this group not because he wanted them to "fix" him or his students or because he wanted their sympathy, but because he felt a need to have others acknowledge their understanding of the challenges he faces as a teacher.

The trust that led Al to share such a personal vignette with the group was not developed through dialogues that were always centered on classrooms, but dialogues in which the participants felt that others were respectful, concerned, honest—whether the topic was a loved one's medical condition or the integration of writing into the math curriculum.

The relationships that developed among WFYL teachers were relationships that were not forged in a fifteen-week semester, but were developed over five years of self- and group-research and study. They were relationships that were forged not during conversations at appointed times on prescribed topics, but at times that were most convenient for the reader/writer and on topics that seemed relevant and important at that particular time and place. They weren't relationships that were formed because of geographic

proximity, but because the participants were like minded, intent on improving their practice, their students' literacy, the chance for their students to live healthy lives. Had theirs not been a virtual setting in which written dialogues that seemed at once to invite introspection and collaboration as the primary method of communication, these close-knit relationships might not have formed. In a new genre that appeared to blur the lines between friendly conversations, argumentative essays, personal letter writing, political speeches, business memos, lectures and notes, the content and discourse of the messages might not have seemed so negotiable, and teachers' localities, their lived lives might not have entered the conversation, without the flexibility and undefined expectations of the discourse of this genre this supportive professional colloquy might not have developed.

The discourse of the community was the discourse of professional educators who are also friends. Slang was interspersed with professional jargon, dialect with lengthy citations from classical and professional literature, catcalls about one another's sports teams with notes of sincere sympathy regarding the deaths of loved ones, passionate praise for one another's professional successes with disparaging remarks about those who view complex educational challenges in simplistic ways.

English educators such as Joe Check have noted that convincing teachers to write about their beliefs and

practices for "the public" can be difficult because teachers often believe that others can do "it" (record, reflect and critically analyze their teaching) better than they. Because the listserv entries were viewed as "conversational" rather than "formal" (teachers generally used words such as "talk" and "saying" in reference to their entries), teachers didn't appear too intimidated to record their reflections and analyses in a public place. Because the electronic mail genre is tolerant of more surface level errors (spelling, grammar, syntax) than other modes of teacher publication, teachers were also relieved of the burden of investing precious time in editing their writing (although one method of differentiating between teacher entries and speculating on intent is to examine the ways in which some entries appear to be "free flowing" stream-of-consciousness writing and others appear to be well developed, extended essays).

Reciprocal translation of global educational concerns to local practices and local practices into global educational issues

The listserv dialogue addressed several often voiced, related needs in educational reform because it allowed teachers to talk across naturally-occurring boundaries, across geographic, disciplinary. and grade-level divisions.

Even while reading of the events and interpretations in the most clearly defined "homogeneous" community, within single classrooms, listserv participants were able to read and re-interpret classroom occurrences through two sets of eyes—the K-12 teacher's and the university collaborator's.

Their versions were sometimes similar and on occasion strikingly different.

In addition, teachers were able to see their own classrooms through the reflections, interpretations, and observations of their colleagues in other classrooms in other localities. They were able to compare activities in their classrooms with those in classroom communities different from their own, different socio-economically, racially, and ethnically. They were able to compare their practices working with students of different ages, in different grades, using different teaching methodologies, based in part upon different numbers of years of teaching experience. Such observations on the similarities and differences between and among classrooms, activities, and students offered teachers a much broader frame for their interpretations of their own and one another's practice than an individualized reading program, local inservice workshop, or even a graduate course might well provide.

In the electronic dialogue journal, global educational issues became localized, and local issues that were shared across communities were identified as global issues. For instance, if WFYL teachers were asked about such school reforms as adherence to nationally endorsed curricula, team teaching, block scheduling or year-round school calendars, they might well respond, "Oh, you mean like Heather's Oklahoma City school district's decision to follow Hirsch's curriculum situation?" or "Right, like Beth's school's move

to team teaching in Beloit," or "I remember how Laura asked the other teacher who taught in block scheduled schools for help when she transferred to New York City," or "Audrey helped us all understand better the inherent challenges of year round schools in Austin."

Although a graduate course, attracting teachers from a wide variety of districts who have chosen to implement a similar range of reforms might offer similar insights, because the listserv conversation required so little in terms of financial and time investment to keep it operational, teachers who participated were able to do more than hear anecdotal accounts of the implementation of these reforms. They were able to ask probing questions; they were able to watch the unfolding—at times the collapsing—of the reforms over the course of a five-year period. Such insights—told first person, from the perspective of a teacher who was trying at once to honor the reform and his or her own beliefs about teaching, offer invaluable insights to other practicing teachers.

When WFYL teacher's beliefs about teaching and learning and mandated reforms were in conflict with one another, the listserv became a politically safe place where teachers could vent frustration and ask advice. On many occasions, teachers worked together to develop methods of articulating their beliefs about their practice in ways that would be convincing to colleagues with opposing views. On those occasions, participants discussed the politics of teaching and reform.

There were frank discussions of the rhetoric of reform, of audience and argument—what types of arguments would be convincing to what audiences. Perhaps because several of the WFYL teachers considered physical safety a basic right of all students, and because they felt that in their particular contexts that student right was at risk, on more occasions than I like to recall, they had to decide whether they would do what they considered best for the health and well-being of their students or what a school district mandated they must do. At those times, they often referred to the listserv conversation as a "lifeline."

2. English Educators and Educational Reform that Makes Sense to Teachers: Teaching in the Abstract and in Practice

Teachers often resent, understandably, programs for educational and school reform that are proposed by individuals and agencies who are not either in service or in close communication with the day-to-day practice of teaching. To practicing teachers, suggestions made by educational reformers often seem naive, unworkable, even unwise. For instance, many of the calls for reform are based on mandates that individuals and agencies outside of schools call on teachers to implement by *insisting* that students engage in particular kinds of activities such as these: Read a core of common texts, or do well on decontextualized, standardized tests not necessarily to demonstrate competence but to facilitate comparison with others' test performance, or

master a set of grammatical or syntactical forms, or . . . . They attribute power to teachers that teachers don't have.

Teachers have one piece of collateral they can use to persuade young people to study and perform—grades. English language arts teachers, like Al, who are committed to educating students for whom grades are not persuasive inducements to learning, have to develop curricula and approaches to learning that attract such students. These teachers invite and encourage students to use the English language arts for purposes that are meaningful to them. This is not to say that these teachers do not teach the subject matter they are responsible for teaching or that they are not demanding. It is to say that that they ground their subject matter in students' experiences and understandings, and that their demands make sense to students. For instance, when their purpose is to teach effective language use, they don't ask students to memorize grammatical rules from handbooks; rather, they develop publication projects that engage students in learning about voice, audience, grammar, and syntax as they employ these linguistic and rhetorical tools to compose meaningful messages.

Reformers call for lengthening the school day, the school year, and class periods; for reorganizing curriculum into units of study developed devoid of the particularities of students and communities; or reorganizing teachers into teams whose members someone else has assigned. Such artificial changes hold little chance for meaningful change.

As I read Al's account of his encounters before the school day even began, I recalled the beginning of his previous year when his students identified violence prevention as their thematic area of inquiry and public service—choices that seemed wise to them since they walked through metal detectors every day upon their arrival at school and frequently listened to stories of community violence that involved teenagers they knew well. I remembered how his students had badgered him, and he had happily agreed to meet them on weekends—at their homes, at school, at local churches—to help them develop grant proposals to fund a peer mediation program. His students asked Al to work with them after school hours because *their class periods weren't long enough for them to do all the work they wanted to do*. As they developed grant proposals, Al called on community members with expertise in grantmaking to meet with his students during a full-day workshop. The community members agreed; it was a project and a team that made sense to all those involved. On a day when what was foremost in Al's mind was what he was *not* able to change in the circumstances of his students' lives, I wanted to remind him of what he *can* and *has done* for them.

Teaching: A Profoundly Contextualized Activity

E.D. Hirsch (1996) is very clear in suggesting to the public that the ineffectuality of American schools may be attributed to the failure of teachers who do not make appropriate demands on students. He notes that if educators

would simply "emphasize hard work, the learning of facts, and rigorous teaching . . . [students would] become successful citizens in the information age civilization" (front and back cover).

But the experience of teachers like Beth (Steffen, 12/3/97) doesn't confirm Hirsch's approach, as I noted in Chapter Five:

> My school, consistently one of the five largest in the state of Wisconsin, which is among the 33% most populous states in America, has a huge and persistent problem with truancy. We have a special grade, F-, for the kids who fail because they are absent (the argument goes that it's not fair to hold teachers accountable for failing students if the students' bodies are in the classroom). When kids are not in school, they can't learn, they can't develop skills to be safe in the modern world, and their poverty and violence (today one of my students, the most hard core gang banger I know well whose nickname is Trigga, showed my sophomore class the gunshot wound in his knee cap) swallow them. My WFYL classes are well attended. Rarely does anyone fail (including with an F- grade). At Beloit Memorial, kids come to WFYL classes and skip more traditional classes. Their success is wholly attributable to the relevance of the curriculum that they help to define in their lives.

And as practicing teachers know only too well, it isn't only educational reformers who attempt to engage them in activities and beliefs that aren't consonant with their teaching experiences. Many of those responsible for planning and conducting professional development experiences for teachers do not speak realistically to teachers' work. They don't want or aren't able to deal with the messy—what some might call melodramatic—issues that arise when teachers work with students. Their programs often focus teachers' attention on subject matter and how it may be learned, by

anyone, anywhere. Too often these program planners bracket out essential elements in the teaching/learning equation. Although they can usually be counted on to speak to issues of teaching philosophy, methodology, and materials, they can also usually be counted on to leave out the human dynamics that determine what can be accomplished in teaching/learning situations: the lived lives and relationships that exist among teachers, students, and communities.

Teaching is a highly contextualized, embedded process. Those who would teach well—whatever the level of schooling—need to attend closely to the individuals to whom they say meaningful things and act in understandable ways. They must *listen* and *hear* what their students and their students' families and friends tell them they must know if they are to be able to teach English, or any other subject.

The importance of *listening* is a theme that is threaded through the WFYL teachers' listserv conversations. In comments like these, the English educators in the WFYL Project have talked to one another about listening and learning:

<u>On listening to learn from students:</u>

- I think my focus for the year relates to your problem—what are the conditions under which kids will truly listen to each other. . . . Who listens to whom, why, and when?
- I listened to a kid who was frustrated, hurt and defensive and tried to get to the underlying cause.
- . . . Kids know they aren't being listened to or respected by adults; we know that listening to kids can be perceived as "subversive;" I am wondering why

so many people are afraid to listen. How did this happen?

- Listening to your kids and helping them define and focus their questions has always worked for me. Trust them and believe in their respect for your trust…

On listening to learn from one another:

- I also try to listen and offer collegial sounding board moments. I remember how isolated I felt in my K-12 classroom.
- As soon as I've defined my problem for you concerned listeners, I feel better . . . Writing is thinking, as someone said (source, anyone?) and this works better for my problem solving than talking on the phone.
- Many of my peers would consider it whining if I were to share my need to "dump" with them, or they would feel that they had to "offer advice" rather than just listening.
- Although the request for this direct teaching requests such as this one appeared to involve only two teachers, we would often discover at some later date that others had "listened in" and carried away the new practice as well.

In "Entering the Dance of Conversation," a chapter in *Literature for Democracy* (1996), Gordon Pradl writes:

> Through our words, we display our respect for what the other knows and feels. By seeing our talk in terms of possibilities, rather than certainties, we come to understand that the way we speak, as much as what we say, has real consequences for students, who are constantly weighing and choosing among alternative linguistic representations of reality. (p. 104)

I would add: It isn't only what we say and how we say it, but how well prepared we are to listen—to demonstrate our respect for the knowledge and lived experience of others through our respectful listening—that determines the degree to which dialogue may become purposeful and productive for educational reformers, classroom teachers, students and parents from across the multicultural grain of our society. As a nation we are asked to make our diversity our strength.

In fact, we have no choice but to do so. And to do so, we must learn to listen and learn from one another.

In *Dialogue in Teaching,* Nick Burbules identifies those characteristics that he believes are inherent in generative dialogues. In the introduction to Burbules' book, his editor, Jonas Soltis, describes and names those characteristics this way:

> Genuine dialogue if it is to have a chance at success rides on the participants' mutual feelings of concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope as well as on cognitive understanding. As a human practice with a long tradition, it also embodies and requires a set of virtues that include tolerance, patience, openness, restraint, and the willingness to listen, thereby empowering the other to speak. (p. vii)

In Chapter Three, I argue that the professional development experiences WFYL teachers created for one another were created in dialogue. They depended upon our ability to establish a community, a community whose members Burbules might recognize to be tolerant, patient, open, restrained, and willing to listen in order that they may empower others to speak.

Cognitive understandings alone can not sufficiently equip those who plan and conduct professional development opportunities for teachers. Those who facilitate professional development experiences for educators need to listen carefully to teachers who listen carefully to students and their families if they are to design programs that prepare teachers to teach in the settings in which they must do so. Those settings, like the world in which we live, are

filled with people who are struggling to make sense and meaning of a world that places them too often at risk.

For education at any level, in any setting, to "take root" it must be deeply contextualized. With WFYL teachers, as with WFYL students, that means beginning at the beginning, with what is already known, with what has already been experienced. For teachers, particularly, it means that experiences that will foster their meaningful professional development must:

- Invite them to bring their prior and existing understandings and texts to their new studies,
- Shape their new areas of inquiry from existing, pressing questions,
- Acknowledge and support the multi-disciplinary focus of their inquiries,
- Introduce relevant existing knowledge for them to study even as they seek to construct new knowledge for the broader community of which they are a part,
- Invite them to use various language arts—reading, writing, speaking and listening, viewing and designing as well as using a variety of discourse styles and genres in which to extend their understandings,
- Engage them in collaborative study with others whose lived experiences and prior texts will inform their own,
- Invite them to use their work and study in ways that benefit others.

Burbules has suggested, and I think the WFYL electronic dialogue journal demonstrates, that

> . . . we learn to engage in dialogue *by* engaging in dialogue. We improve through practice, by persisting in our efforts with a range of others and by trying to learn from their experiences, as well as from our own.

> Dialogue is, I have suggested, a "bootstrapped" endeavor; our errors and failings in dialogue can be corrected only through more dialogue—and we need to maintain and develop our communication relations with others for this to occur. (Burbules, 1993, p. 153)

Since contributing to an electronic dialogue journal did appear to be a "bootstrapped" practice in which we engaged and critically reflected on our engagements, we made and continue to make our share of mistakes along the way. Some of the project participants didn't have access to the technology in a sufficiently convenient manner to invite their participation, and we were unable to provide the technology for them. Some found the medium undesirable; they stated a clear preference for face-to-face communications that would allow them to read non-verbal signals while discussing what often were sensitive subjects that could be misconstrued by a reader not sufficiently immersed in a community's culture. At other times, we alienated even those who were willing to participate. At least two participants noted that they withdrew after initial forays onto the list were met by silence that they couldn't interpret. I was reminded as I read these two teachers' observations in their reflections on the role of the listserv in the WFYL Project of Maxine Greene's exhortation that we find the methods of staying "wide awake" and seeking our own transcendence, of the recent harshly critical media accounts of teachers and teaching which have served to silence many teachers, and of these closing lines from William Stafford's "A Ritual to Read to Each Other":

> For it is important that awake people be awake,
> Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
> The signals we give—yes, or no, or maybe—
> Should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Despite these caveats, I believe that the listserv conversations between educators who have chosen to develop inquiry-based, dialogic curricula that take into account the communities in which they are embedded allow teachers to engage in a kind of dialogue that offers real promise for the improvement of education. This dialogue can constitute network cultures in which teachers can offer one another "authentic" professional development opportunities—opportunities that speak to the whole of teaching—to the teaching of *students* and the teaching of *subject matter*. The dialogue of the Write for Your Life teachers provides an example of how such a network may be constituted across time and place through emerging technology.

On the listserv, one of the teachers drew our attention to the following quote from Ann Haas Dyson (1993) in "Research as Duet," as a way of suggesting that the quote might explain the commitment on the part of WFYL teachers to the students in their classrooms:

> In addressing others, children compose texts that declare their existence in the world, but that existence is acknowledged, momentarily completed, only by the response of the other. All of us come to know ourselves as we take responsibility for responding to the other; our fates are bound together in dialogue . . . For, in answering the children, we are also composing ourselves (pp. 229-230).

I would suggest that a parallel was occurring in the electronic dialogue journal in which teachers were

participating. In their messages that were return posted to them and to one another, teachers were declaring, defining and generatively revising their existence in their professional landscapes.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

LIST OF WFYL PARTICIPANTS, SCHOOLS, STATES, AND YEARS OF PARTICIPATION

APPENDIX A:

WFYL Participants, Schools, States and Years of Participation

1993 – 1999

	Name	School	State	Year(s) of Participation				
				1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
T	Abernathy, Scott	Madison Middle School 2000	WI		X			
U	Alberts, Joye	Oklahoma State University	OK				X	X
T	Appelsies, Audrey	Webb Middle School West Central Academy	TX MN			X	 X	 X
G	Bernards, Julie	University of Wisconsin	WI		X			
T	Bigjohn, Dolli	Menominee Junior High School	WI		X			
T	Brewster, Grace Martino	Webb Middle School	TX				X	X
T	Chevako, Don	Milwaukee Turning Point Middle School Milwaukee Washington High School	WI WI	X 	 X			
T	Cooper, Meribeth	Cobb County Schools	GA			X		
T	Curry, Toby	Dewey Center for Urban Education	MI	X	X	X	X	X
T	Davis, Carol	Marietta Dodgen Middle School	GA				X	X

T = Classroom Teacher, U = University Collaborator, G = Graduate Student, ST = Student Teacher, CD = Co-Director, O = Other

	Name	School	State	Year(s) of Participation				
				1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
U	Doherty, Judith	University of Massachusetts-Boston	MA				X	X
T	Donahoo, Omelia	Hubert Middle School Wilder Middle School	GA GA			X	 X	 X
T	Dougherty, Diane	Coatesville Area Senior High School	PA				X	X
T	Dukes, Gloria	Wilder Midldle School	GA			X	X	X
U	Fairbanks, Colleen	University of Texas-Austin	TX			X	X	X
U	Fishman, Andrea (Andy)	West Chester University	PA				X	X
T	Floyd, Sharon	Saginaw High School	MI	X				
U	Fox, Pat	Armstrong Atlantic State University	GA			X	X	X
T	Golden, Peter	South Boston High School	MA				X	X
T	Goolsby, Beth	East Cobb Middle School	GA			X		
	Groth, Hilary	New Glarus High School	WI		X			
T	Hermes, Mary Fong	Lac Court Oreilles Ojibway School	WI	X				
T	Huber, Andrew	Coatesville Area Senior High School	PA					X
T	Hudson, Don	New Glarus High School	WI	X				
O	Jurgens, Jane Denton	Saginaw Staff Development Center	MI	X				

T = Classroom Teacher, U = University Collaborator, G = Graduate Student, ST = Student Teacher, CD = Co-Director, O = Other

	Name	School	State	Year(s) of Participation				
				1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
T	Kinder, Debbie	Platteville High School	WI	X	X	X	X	X
T	LaPlante, Kevin	Dewey Center for Urban Education	MI	X	X	X	X	X
T	Martin, Terri	Flint Central High School	MI		X			
G	Michell, Michael	Michigan State University	MI	X	X			
T	Miesiaszek, Mary	East Cobb Middle School	GA			X	X	X
T	Mitchell, Diana	Lansing Sexton High School	MI	X				
T	Moore, Nina	Dewey Center for Urban Education	MI	X				
U	Morgan, Pam	Towson State University	MD				X	X
T	Nepper, Mark	Madison West High School	WI		X			
	Petersen, Gail	Belleville High School	WI		X			
T	Ploeser, Mary	Madison Middle School 2000	WI	X	X			
T	Rebney, Linda Bush	Arthur Hill High School	MI	X				
G	Richardson, Elaine	Michigan State University	MI		X			
U	Robbins, Sarah	Kennesaw State University	GA			X	X	X
CD	Robinson, Jay	University of Michigan	MI	X				
T	Robinson, Toi	Halstead Academy	MD				X	

T = Classroom Teacher, U = University Collaborator, G = Graduate Student, ST = Student Teacher, CD = Co-Director, O = Other

	Name	School	State	Year(s) of Participation				
				1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
CD	Schaafsma, David	University of Wisconsin Teachers College, Columbia University	WI NY	X	X	X	X	X
T	Seaman, Margo	Authors Workshop	NY			X	X	X
T	Shinaver, Alan	Saginaw Arthur Hill High School	MI		X	X	X	X
T	Shoufler, Carey	Don Bosco School of Technology	MA				X	X
T	Smith, Kathie	Saginaw High School	MI	X				
	Sosnouski, Amy	Belleville High School	WI		X			
T	Sparks, Heather	Wheeler Elementary	OK			X	X	X
T	Spitz, Barb	Madison Middle School 2000	WI	X				
T	Steffen, Beth	Beloit Memorial High School	WI			X	X	X
T	Stivers, Kim	Juliette Low Elementary School	GA				X	X
CD	Stock, Patricia (Patti)	Michigan State University	MI	X	X			
T	Stone, Bonnie	McCloy Hill High School	MI		X			
CD	Swenson, Janet	Michigan State University	MI	X	X	X	X	X
T	Tendero, Jennifer DeGraaf	New York Public Schools	NY			X	X	X
T G	Tendero, Tony	Longfellow Middle School Teachers College, Columbia University	VA NY	X	X	X	X	X

T = Classroom Teacher, U = University Collaborator, G = Graduate Student, ST = Student Teacher, CD = Co-Director, O = Other

	Name	School	State	Year(s) of Participation				
				1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
T	Thompson, Corey	Madison Middle School 2000	WI	X				
	Thompson, Cheryl Schobert	Platteville High School	WI		X			
O	Tolbert, Marsha	Wilder Middle School	GA			X	X	X
T	Vander Ploeg, Laura Schneider	Janesville Marshall Middle School	WI		X	X	X	X
T	West, Wynne	Webb Middle School	TX					X
T	Williams, Deborah	Saginaw High School	MI		X			
G	Wilson, Miranda	New Glarus High School	WI	X				
T	Wilson, Stuart	Lansing Sexton High School	MI	X				

T = Classroom Teacher, U = University Collaborator, G = Graduate Student, ST = Student Teacher, CD = Co-Director, O = Other

APPENDIX B:

SELECTED SAMPLES OF LISTSERV CONVERSATIONS

Appendix B

1993-1994

May19/93 14:13
2:11) Janet Swenson: Student violence is BIG BUSINESS in Flint currently. Days after the student shot himself in the leg while watching prom-goers, five students, the youngest only fourteen, shot and killed a thrity-five year old man who had stopped at a convenience store on the way home to his wife and two young children. The boys had just robbed the store. There are LOTS of newspaper articles I'm bringing copies of an editorial--the gist is that we are no longer sufficiently shocked and outraged at student violence. I have the strong suspician that any program designed to address student vioence would be fervently embraced by this community.
- - - - -
May24/93 18:48
2:12) David Schaafsma: I am making copies of Street Heat: Guns Gangs and Violence, even now. I like the video--produced by kids from MIlwaukee Marshalk-1 HIgh School's Video Production classes and think it might be very useful.
- - - - -
May25/93 21:41
2:13) Response deleted by organizer
- - - - -
May26/93 16:40
2:14) Response deleted by organizer
- - - - -
May28/93 12:13
2:15) David Schaafsma: I am sending a piece by Gordon Wells on inquiry-based instruction that we might want to share with teachers. It is a paper he gave at NCTE, following a paper by Toby Curry which was a look at her inquiry-based classroom, a very fun and messy opening day where ideas are flying around. This might be good, too. The videotapes (Street Heat) are done and I will send them out. That might be nice to view on our weekend, maybe in the evening or something, with possibly Buzz's videos that he did with his Video and Community class and Dewey Center students. Does the CEIC have a copy of those, Jay? We should have copy of those on hand either way since they are greatexamples of community exploration.
- - - - -
Jun01/93 10:45
2:16) David Schaafsma: I have a couple suggestions for possible reading: a book by Colin Lankshear called Literacy and Revolution (that is close to it) and another book I just picked up called Culture, Litearcy, Praxis and the Postmodern, also edited by Colin Lankshear, a Routledge book I think. I just read MIchael Apple's Official KNowledge and am reading Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives by Sndra Harding at the same time I read the Gunn book, but I like the Gunn book better.
- - - - -

1994-1995

Date: Thu, 2 Feb 1995 11:24:13 EST
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: "Antonio B. Tendero" <atendero@PEN.K12.VA.US>
Subject: violence in Don's school
In-Reply-To:<25020117034332@vms2.macc.wisc.edu>; from "David Schaafsma" at Feb 1, 95 5:03 pm

Dave,
Are Don and his students going to explore this incident through curriculum?

I know my students and I would be very interested in their stories. . . .if only in their telling of this story and perhaps some reflection. . . .in writing, on audio tape, on video tape. . . or even what other responses they are making to the incident.

Tony
==========
Date: Thu, 2 Feb 1995 12:52:04 EST
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Linda Rebney <linda.bush@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU>
Subject: Re: Writing Prompt.

Tony, I'd like to do that, but it will be probably another week before I get a ti me to do that with my class. Will that be okay? Linda
==========
Date: Thu, 2 Feb 1995 12:56:08 EST
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Linda Rebney <linda.bush@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU>
Subject: Don's experience. . .

How awful for any school. It will be interesting to see how security is tightened. We have the new name tags here. No one is wearing them, except for a scattered few and no one is demanding that everyone should wear them. Our board is

1995-1996

Date: Mon, 23 Oct 1995 22:55:02 -0400
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Antonio Ramon Tendero <art18@COLUMBIA.EDU>
Subject: Writing about Mango Street and such
In-Reply-To:<64197.srobbins@kscmail.Kennesaw.Edu>

Sarah,

How'd the writing with the middle schoolers go?

==========

Date: Tue, 24 Oct 1995 09:13:54 EST
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Sarah Robbins <srobbins@KSCMAIL.KENNESAW.EDU>
Subject: Re: Writing about Mango Street and such

We are just now in the process of reading their pieces, which are quite interesting.
Here are a few of the trends we've observed in their papers:
1) "where you live" doesn't just mean house/place; it can also mean the people you live with, wish you live with, etc. and/or the kinds of things you do where you live
2) related to #1 but sometimes esp. striking--affective responses to this prompt were often focused on feelings about wanting to feel safe--in personal relationships, from violence, etc.
3) students who wrote on an ideal place to live sometimes wrote way into their adult futures and other times reconstructed their current situations (e.g., divorced parents reconciled, out of crowded apartment quarters)
4) several students wrote descriptions of their living situations and then commented on how the writing made them realize how LUCKY they are to live where they do--here again, the focus could be on either the physical setting, the relationships, or some combination.
Later this week, the middlers will be reading the papers written by their college counterparts. We'll see what the kids think of our pieces!

1996-1997

Date: Tue, 5 Nov 1996 20:59:57 -0500
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Toby Curry <TOBYTEACH@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Themes

Ok you guys, knock off the vailed threats and bickering. The names of the books you want to help move kids to SOCIAL ACTION are It's Our World, Too : Stories of Young People Who Are Making A Difference by Phillip Hoose Publisher Little, Brown and Co, 1993 And The Kids Guide To Social Action by Barbara A. Lewis Free Spirit Publsihing (Minneapolis, MN) 1991 and If This Is Social Studies, Why Isn't It Boring? By Stephanie Steffey and Wendy Hood Stenhouse Publishers, 1994

Now, stop harassing Janet. She gave the first book to me a year ago or I bought it, in any case that's the title she was trying to remember for Laura.

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Date: Wed, 6 Nov 1996 09:00:38 -0500
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Antonio Ramon Tendero <art18@COLUMBIA.EDU>
Subject: Friere is Wrong?
In-Reply-To:
<961105191540_1282389939@emout14.mail.aol.com>

Omelia,

I too am being pushed by ole ED. I was fascinated by his look at Friere and his use of the other Marxist . . . Gramsci to support his claims. I'm not too familiar with Gramsci, but it is still so interesting how Hirsch "uses" the argument of a Marxist who seems rather far from ED's "cultural literacy" stuff. He gets to know the language of the "progressives" and then uses it to forward his argument. Maybe in the same way Clinton has coopted the Republican terms of "family values" and "workfare." I'm wondering if there are more ways that we can do this in WFYL. I remember Janet talking about using the SCANS document(can't remember what it stands for) to support what we are doing in WFYL classrooms.

1997-98

Date: Sun, 7 Sep 1997 13:37:50 -0400
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Beth Steffen <SteffenBD@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Beth's publication

Thanks Diane--having your students as readers will help my students care about the quality and content of their work. How's it going for you anyway??? Don't you have the four block? Do you like it? If I remember correctly, last year in Chicago Andy Fishman was full of questions about starting up WFYL there. How did it go? Would love to "hear" some sample stories from your classroom(s).
Beth

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Date: Sun, 7 Sep 1997 16:49:30 -0400
Reply-To: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
Sender: Write For Your Life - Teachers <WFYLTCHR@MSU.EDU>
From: Diane Dougherty <Joedocret@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Beth's publication

Thanks for your interest Beth.
I was bummed when I didn't get to Chicago because of illness. For the first year I was pleased with what we accomplished, but I know we can do more. Last year I had students write about alcoholism (the writer had a friend who had been convicted of vehicular manslaughter for his involvement in a drunk-driving accident which killed his girlfriend), about femal athletes and their self-image, about autism (the writer has an autistic younger brother), and being a mother and a student (the writer was both and is this year attending college in Virginia on an athletic scholarship). Unfortunately, I was hesitant about sharing what we were doing because I felt intimidated by all of you...you do such wonderful things that I didn't think I could add anything of significance. Andy Fishman has been very supportive, however, and I am determined to be a real part of things this year. This year I'm working with a colleague who is in his second year of teaching (we both have 12th grade) and we hope that our students will collaborate. Andy Huber is his name and he was enrolled in the summer writing institute at West Chester University (a National Writing Project site) that I co-facilitated. Well, this is probably more than you wanted to

APPENDIX C:

STUDENT DIVERSITY IN THE WFYL PROJECT

Appendix C

Student Diversity in the Write for Your Life Project
(by percent)

School/City	White/ Caucasian	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Hispanic	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black	Total*
Kennesaw, GA	83	0	3	10	3	99
Savannah, GA (1)	29	0	7	0	64	100
Savannah, GA (2)	38	0	5	5	52	100
Savannah, GA (3)	33	0	0	0	67	100
Baltimore, MD	0	0	0	0	100	100
Boston, MA	41	0	16	9	34	100
Saginaw, MI	68	0	17	0	17	102
Detroit, MI (1)	1	0	0	0	99	100
Detroit, MI (2)	1	0	0	0	99	100
Minneapolis, MN	4	4	21	0	71	100
New York, NY (1)	0	0	30	0	70	100
New York, NY (2)	0	0	30	0	70	100
Oklahoma City, OK	39	10	43	0	7	99
Coatesville, PA	98	0	0	0	2	100
Austin, TX	24	0	57	3	17	101
Janesville, WI	97	1	1	0	1	100
Beloit, WI	66	0	6	2	26	100
Platteville, WI	94	3	3	0	0	100
Total Project	40	1	13	2	44	100

*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding

APPENDIX D:

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION ON THE WFYL TEACHER LISTSERV

Appendix D:

Levels of Participation on the WFYL Teacher Listserv

1994 - 1995

	Participants	Sep-94	Oct-94	Nov-94	Dec-94	Jan-95	Feb-95	Mar-95	Apr-95	May-95	Jun-95	Jul-95	Aug - 95	Totals	% Conv
1	CD-Janet		10	19	11	41	36	29	8	3				162	23%
2	CD-David	1	18	11	3	37	53	10	11	1	1			146	21%
3	GS-Michael				7	na	na	na	na	na	na			7	1%
4	GS-Elaine	na	na	na	na				1					1	>1%
5	T-Linda	2	29	25	12	39	26	10	9	1				153	22%
6	T/O-Jane	2	16	8	8	13	4	7	4	1				63	9%
7	T-Alan					1	3	10	5	4	1			24	4%
8	T-Sharon			2	3	8	4	3	2	1				23	3%
9	T-Tony					26	42	20	4	3	1			96	14%
10	T-Bonnie						6	2		1				9	1%
11	ST-Julie					1								1	>1%
12	T/O-Debbie			2				3	1		1			7	1%
	TOTALS	10	73	67	44	166	174	94	45	15	4			692	

CD = Co-Director, U = University Coordinator, T = Classroom Teacher, O = Other, ST = Student Teacher, G= Graduate Student

1995 - 1996

	Participants	Oct-95	Nov-95	Dec-95	Jan-96	Feb-96	Mar-96	Apr-96	May-96	Jun-96	Jul-96	Aug-96	Totals	% Conv
1	CD-Janet	18	9	4	27	34	14	9	5	3	4	9	136	21%
2	CD-David	20	18	11	26	26	6	24	1	5	9	6	152	23%
3	U- Tony	10	2	8	15	14	6	2	2	7	1		67	10%
4	U-Colleen	5	2	2	6	9	7	5			1	1	38	6%
5	U-Judith													NA
6	U-Andrea	1						1					2	>1%
7	U-Joye													NA
8	U-Sarah	14	9	1	8	6	9	10	1	1		2	61	9%
9	U-Pam													NA
10	U-Pat	4	6	1	7	2	3	2		5	4		34	5%
11	T-Toby													
12	T-Kevin													
13	T-Heather													NA
14	T-Audrey		1	3	20	14	7	7	6	3	6	4	71	11%
15	T-Grace													NA
16	T-Beth							3					3	1%
17	T-Laura				10	4	5	3	1				23	3%
18	T-Debbie	2	3	5	5	5	9	7	4	4	4	2	50	8%
19	T-Jennifer													NA
20	T-Gloria													
21	T-Ornelia	3		1	1	7	3				6	1	22	3%
22	T-Mary								1				1	>1%
23	T-Diane													>1%
24	T-Alan													
25	O-Marsha											1	1	>1%
	TOTALS	77	50	36	125	121	69	73	21	28	35	26	661	

CD = Co-Director, U = University Coordinator, T = Classroom Teacher, O = Other, ST = Student Teacher, G= Graduate Student

1996 - 1997

	Participants	Sep-96	Oct-96	Nov-96	Dec-96	Jan-97	Feb-97	Mar-97	Apr-97	May-97	Jun-97	Jul-97	Aug-97	TOTALS	% of conv
1	CD-Janet	14	43	11	8	32	15	17	17	20	3		11	191	26%
2	CD-David	13	30	5	2	21	11	6	9	1	6		3	107	15%
3	U-Tony	1	16	7		9	2	4	2	2				43	6%
4	U-Colleen	2	1	2	3	7	2	1	2					20	3%
5	U-Judith	2	1	5	6	3	6	1	1			1	2	28	4%
6	U-Andrea	3	7		1	1	3	2	1					18	2%
7	U-Joye	1				1								2	>1%
8	U-Sarah		9	1	4	5	3	6	1					29	4%
9	U-Pam				1			1					3	5	1%
10	U-Pat		5		1	2								8	1%
11	T-Toby	6		5	1	2	2		5				2	23	3%
12	T-Kevin		1	2										3	>1%
13	T-Heather	1	2											3	>1%
14	T-Audrey	6	4	2		6			3	3	1		3	28	4%
15	T-Grace		12	1	2		1							16	2%
16	T-Beth		11	3	1	7	1	7	6	6	4		1	47	6%
17	T-Laura	3	10	3	10	15	15	9	12	9	2		1	89	1%
18	T-Debbie	3		6	1	10	6	5	5	1	1		5	43	6%
19	T-Jennifer					2	1							3	>1%
20	T-Gloria	2	4											6	1%
21	T-Ornelia		4	2		1	1	1						9	1%
22	T-Mary		3	2		1	3	1		1				11	2%
23	T-Diane		3											3	>1%
24	T-Alan		1			2	1						1	5	1%
25	O-Marsha														
	TOTALS	57	167	57	41	127	73	61	64	43	17	1	32	740	

CD = Co-Director, U = University Coordinator, T = Classroom Teacher, O = Other, ST = Student Teacher, G= Graduate Student

1997 - 1998 (to date)

	Participants	Sep-97	Oct-97	Nov-97	Dec-97	Jan-98	Feb-98	Mar-98	Apr-98	May-98	Jun-98	Jul-98	Aug-98	Totals	% Conv
1	CD-Janet	18	22	15	15	9	10	12	12					113	20%
2	CD-David	9	8	10	17	11	7	9	6					77	14%
3	U-Tony		10	8	6									24	4%
4	U-Colleen	1	5	3	2	6	3	2	2					24	4%
5	U-Judith	1												1	>1%
6	U-Andrea	4	5	5		1	1		7					23	4%
7	U-Joye	1												1	>1%
8	U-Sarah	5	2	2	2	1	3	2	3					20	4%
9	U-Pam			1	2	1			2					6	1%
10	U-Pat								1					1	>1%
11	T-Toby	4	1	8	4	5	5	1	1					29	5%
12	T-Kevin	3	4	1	1	2		2	4					17	3%
13	T-Heather														
14	T-Audrey	12	12	8	4	8	8	2	11					65	12%
15	T-Grace	1	5	4	3	1	1		1					16	3%
16	T-Beth	8	16	9	9	6	4	3	6					61	11%
17	T-Laura	1	4	3	2									10	2%
18	T-Debbie	5	4	3	4	2	2	3	5					28	5%
19	T-Jennifer		6						1					7	1%
20	T-Gloria														
21	T-Omelia		1	1					4					6	1%
22	T-Mary														
23	T-Diane	10	5	2	3	1	1	2	2					26	5%
24	T-Alan	1			1			2	8					12	2%
25	O-Marsha														
	TOTALS	84	110	83	75	54	45	40	76					567	

CD = Co-Director, U = University Coordinator, T = Classroom Teacher, O = Other, ST = Student Teacher, G= Graduate Student

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