

# Teachers at the Center

## A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project

JAMES GRAY

*Nineteen seventy-four was a big year for writing education in America. That summer, at the first summer institute of the first writing project site in the country, Jim Gray put into action a radically new idea about teacher education—that successful classroom teachers make the best teachers of other teachers. In this excerpt from his new book, Teachers at the Center, he offers a refreshing glimpse into the people, experiences, and practices that helped him shape the writing project model.*

There we were—twenty-nine of us, counting the codirectors and myself—on a Monday morning in the summer of 1974, the first day of the first invitational institute of the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP).

Present in the room were Miles Myers, the Oakland high school teacher who would one day become executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, and Mary Ann Smith, the young woman who twenty-five years later would serve as codirector of the National Writing Project, as well as her team-teaching colleague, Jo Fyfe, a future associate director of the project.

There also were Bill Brandt of the UC Berkeley rhetoric department, who believed the key to strong writing was a carefully crafted topic sentence, and Sandy Seale, who was teaching her inner-city students to “code switch” long before the term was coined. Also present were future BAWP codirector Mary K. Healy, then a middle school teacher and Ph.D. candidate who had studied in England with the great literacy

theoretician and researcher James Britton, and Cap Lavin, the legendary University of San Francisco basketball great who was in the process of becoming a legendary teacher of English.

Walking into the room, one teacher, Joan Christopher, could not believe her eyes. “I really didn’t think anyone would be there,” she told me later. “I was thinking maybe I was the only teacher in the world who cared about teaching writing.”

This was an exciting but very bumpy time as we began to bring together the key elements of the model.

We were reluctant to ask everyone to give a demonstration, but the teachers who did show us their successful classroom practices confirmed our belief that the summer institute would cross-pollinate the successful teaching of writing as perhaps no other structure could.

Barney Tanner, the San Mateo County high school teacher whom I had known for many years, gave a presentation on coherence. It

was the kind of smart, ordered, and useful presentation one might have expected from a man dedicated to prodding his students toward successful academic writing.

But the presentation by Mary Ann Smith and Jo Fyfe, who were team teaching at Loma Vista Intermediate Junior High School, must have given Barney something to think about. In their classroom, they had been using the James Moffett *Interaction* series, which drew on booklets and activity cards, readings and prompts, and which introduced students to many forms of creative and real-world writing: letter writing, autobiographical writing, play-writing, and limericks, for instance. Mary Ann and Jo were committed to Moffett’s key pedagogical idea: students need to experiment with genres, finding topics that interest them and working at their own pace. They explained Moffett’s ideas and showed us examples of student work and a video of their own classroom in action. This concept was far ahead of the thinking of many of the high school and college

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teachers present at the institute. They, like almost all teachers at the time, had for the most part operated behind closed doors. We had brought together the most talented teachers we could find, yet as I was to understand over time, even teachers of this caliber have a lot to learn from one another.

One demonstration in particular opened our eyes. Kate Blickhahn, a teacher at Sir Francis Drake High School in Marin County, who would become principal of a neighboring school, demonstrated the concept of holistic scoring. This process allowed student writing to be assessed and ranked according to an agreed-upon rubric and in comparison to other students. It had been used at College Board readings for some time.

However, it was a concept foreign to most classroom teachers. Not everyone present that day felt comfortable with the idea that a piece of student writing could be assessed without marking it up. But Kate explained that the purpose of holistic scoring at the school level was not to comment on an individual student's mastery of subject-verb agreement, but to give teachers, departments, and schools information that they could use to strengthen their writing programs. Everyone present that day took away from Kate's demonstration something they had not thought of before.

Though the key elements of the summer institute were in place from the beginning, we made some major mistakes. For instance, during the first year of the

summer institute, we failed to include elementary teachers. We were so focused on the secondary-only National Defense Education Act model, and on our goal to establish a project that would improve the writing levels of high school graduates, that we didn't even consider the idea of a



*Jim Gray leads the first writing project summer institute in 1974.*

kindergarten through university mix. We should have known better. The need to attend to writing crosses all grade levels. Therefore, the work of all writing teachers on the kindergarten through university continuum is equally important to all other writing teachers. By the second institute, we had corrected our error and included teachers at all grade levels. We understood that teachers are naturally curious about the learning in other classrooms and at other grade levels, and yet they seldom have the chance to find out what's really going on in any classroom other than their own.

I remember one twelfth grade teacher who introduced his demonstration by stating that it probably wouldn't be of any interest or use to anyone but the other senior high school or college teachers, a remark he

came to regret. "Don't tell me what won't work in my classes!" the elementary teachers told him in so many words. After another demonstration, a teacher responded with what she thought was the pointed criticism: "I could do that with my fourth-graders!" But most present understood that

yes, she could, but eleventh-graders would come at the same learning from different intellectual places and different levels of experience. This is one reason eleventh grade teachers and fourth grade teachers are able to share ideas. Whenever an elementary teacher asked me what time the doors to Tolman Hall, the building where we met, opened in the morning, I knew exactly what was going to happen. When we walked into our room on such a morning, we would see a room transformed into a replica of the teacher's own classroom, sometimes

complete with puppets to play with, hats to wear, horns to toot, and whistles to blow. College teachers were fascinated by elementary teachers, and a bit envious also. They couldn't get over the color and decoration of their classrooms—all of it of educational interest—and the joy of these rooms compared to the totally sterile rooms they taught in, which usually had no decoration at all and nothing on the bulletin board but one old flyer for a concert held years earlier.

The Bay Area Writing Project model created an environment where both academics and classroom teachers could appreciate each other. Professors of English and of English education worked as partners and colleagues of classroom teachers. For teachers, BAWP was a university-based program that recognized—even celebrated—teacher

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expertise. For academics and teachers alike, the Bay Area Writing Project model managed to reverse the top-down, voice-from-Olympus model of so many past university efforts at school reform.

Much of what we did during the first years was experimental and tentative. Now we require all participants to do a teaching demonstration and to write and share their writing. Some teachers never did make a presentation, and some were very slow in letting others see what they had written. Feeling our way, we didn't believe we were in a position to hold to rigid requirements.

Similarly, we became ambivalent about another of our initial requirements, that all summer fellows conduct a voluntary workshop for the teachers in their own schools or district during the follow-up year. We were concerned about the Prophet in his Own Land problem, but also, as the first invitational summer institute ran its course, we became aware for the first time that all of the great teachers we had brought together were not going to be equally great teachers of other teachers. We were finding out that teaching teachers was an altogether different art form, and an exceptional seventh grade teacher is not necessarily going to be an exceptional teacher of seventh grade teachers. Some summer fellows did not like to give presentations and never would; they would do something else to stay involved. Many simply needed more time and practice before they were ready to face other teachers.

### In the Right Spot at the Right Time

Thinking back on those early days, I understand that much of the early success of

the writing project can be traced to being in the right spot at the right time. The right spot was a major and highly esteemed public university such as the University of California at Berkeley with its long tradition of public service. The right time was the mid-1970s, when the “Why Johnny Can't



Mary Ann Smith conducts a teacher demonstration at the first summer institute.

Write” stories began to appear in the nation's press: *Newsweek* published shocking samples of students' (and teachers') writing; *Time* reported that the decline in writing abilities was not just a problem of entering freshmen at UC Berkeley but a problem at universities nationwide; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in the report “The Crisis in English Writing,” published similar findings; and in 1975, the press began reporting stories documenting a decline in SAT scores. As reporters investigated these stories, they also began asking what was being done in the nation to attack these problems, and as they looked around, they found the Bay Area Writing Project was the only visible program in place.

As national concern grew, so did interest in the writing project. The resulting press coverage brought—in addition to letters, phone calls, and invitations to speak—a steady number of visitors from other universities.

Stories also began appearing in popular journals and magazines, such as *Readers' Digest*, *Education Today*, and *Woman's Day*. The *New York Times* sent a reporter to the Bay Area to do a story about the writing project. So numerous were the BAWP stories in newspapers and magazines that J. N. Hook, former executive secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, once asked me, “Who's handling your public relations?”

### The Project's First Grant Proposal

In the spring prior to the first BAWP summer institute, I wrote a proposal that I submitted to eight foundations identified by UC Berkeley's Sponsored Projects Office. I was seeking funding for a project that had not yet begun, had not been tested, and had not been fine-tuned in any way. This derring-do was not lost on the reviewers. But I was optimistic. The writing project idea, however described, was exciting stuff, and in the proposal I referred to the “successful Bay Area Writing Project” from these earliest of our beginnings. But instead of receiving award letters that summer, I opened a series of rejection letters. The letter from the National Endowment for the Humanities rejected the proposal because it stated, “Writing is not a part of the humanities”! That caused some stir among the institute teachers.



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But we did get a call from Alden Dunham, program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, requesting a time when he could meet with us during a trip to California. We were all very excited; funding from just one of the eight was all we needed, and that the Carnegie Corporation of New York wanted to discuss our proposal was promising indeed. Bill Brandt, Cap Lavin, Merle Borowman (dean of the School of Education), and I met Dunham in the dean's office. Alden Dunham, elegant, impressive, and always to the point, was aware of the writing problem, as it was beginning to surface in various parts of the country, and possibly because he was a UC Berkeley graduate, he was clearly interested in UC Berkeley doing something to solve the problem. But he was not interested



*Janice Davis, Sandy Seale, and Jo Fyfe, among the first BAWP participants, enjoy a light moment.*

in our proposal. We had expected great news, but what we got from Alden was a critique on the proposal's shortcomings. Alden told us that he reviewed proposals by looking closely at the budget and the evaluation sections. Turning to the pages on evaluation, Alden asked, "Who wrote this? Who wrote this section?" I said I had. And Alden said, "Well, you know nothing about evaluation. Get somebody who does to help you write this section. Get Michael Scriven. He's at Berkeley. You can't get anyone better than Michael."

The meeting had not gone as we had hoped. I was embarrassed and disappointed. However, it didn't take long to realize that

the sum of Alden's pointed comments really added up to an invitation to resubmit, but with the caution—and the directions!—to do it right the next time. Alden was right in rejecting the first proposal: the project was not ready to be funded, and we had accomplished nothing at all at the time we had

submitted it. All of us were determined to submit a second proposal, but not until we had the working evidence to support our claim that we had an idea that would dramatically alter staff development education of teachers. It was not until 1976–77 that we wrote a proposal we were proud to submit.

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On the last afternoon of the last day of the first summer institute, Cap Lavin and I really didn't know what lay ahead. Our effort to raise money had been a bust—seven rejections with one no-response out of eight submissions. It seemed unlikely that the Bay Area Writing Project idea of teachers

teaching teachers would ever be realized. We had five hundred dollars remaining in our account. As we walked down to the parking lot, I turned to Cap and said, "Let's play Let's Pretend. What would we be doing now if we had been funded?" We came up with the idea of blowing the whole five hundred dollars on a cocktail party and dinner in the UC Berkeley Men's Faculty Club for administrators from the schools and districts of the summer fellows. We could talk about the increasing seriousness of the writing problem. We could describe what UC Berkeley could do to help through the Bay Area Writing Project. The teachers could give us the names of key administrators who would likely be interested in what we would have to say.

We talked it over with Rod Park, provost and dean of the College of Letters and Science, and invited him to say a few words about the university's interest in working with schools as partners in this collaborative effort. Park liked the idea and offered to cover any expenses over five hundred dollars. We arranged for a private room in the Faculty Club, and all but one of those invited showed up.

A waiter moved around the group with a tray of cocktails, and we began to have an enjoyable time. But I was new at this, and I didn't know about how the club handled such affairs. I hadn't given them a specific time to stop the flow of drinks and start the

dinner service, so the tray of cocktails continued to make the rounds. One thing led to another as the mood became more festive than informative. Park said a few words, and I started talking about our plans, but I had the distinct impression no one was listening. However, I was to learn that a powerful idea can survive even missteps such as this. During that first year, BAWP received eight invitations to conduct workshops in the schools, though none, I'm afraid, from those in attendance at our dinner.

### The Poly High Debacle

Our first invitation was for a workshop at San Francisco's Polytechnic High School. The principal invited me to bring some teachers who had participated in the first summer's program to talk to the English department. I handpicked a strong group: Cap Lavin, BAWP's codirector; Miles Myers, a highly regarded Oakland high school teacher; and Flossie Lewis, a teacher at San Francisco's esteemed Lowell High School. Poly was not esteemed at the time. The papers regularly carried stories of faculty unrest and political and social tension on the campus. We weren't really surprised to find graffiti-filled halls. One inscription shouted at us, "Black is Beautiful; Yellow is Mellow; White is Shit." The teachers were waiting for us. I introduced my colleagues and began describing what the Bay Area Writing Project was all about. Suddenly, I was hit in the face by a paper wad thrown by some guy sitting in the second row. I ignored it and plowed ahead. Another paper wad. I was dumbfounded. Here we were, excited by this first invitation and the start, we hoped, of a long line of such invitations, and things were out of control. I reasoned that the situation could only get better, so I continued on. Another paper wad! Miles jumped out of his seat, went to the board,

and began charting out some plan or model when someone else in the room shouted out: "Miles, go on back to Oakland where you belong!" Cap and Flossie were agitated. Cap, who suffered from angina, popped a nitroglycerin pill; Flossie was close to tears. Nothing made sense. The paper wad thrower shouted: "Gimmie some pencils! If you want to help us, give us some pencils; we can always use pencils." The workshop was clearly over, and the four of us left the room.

We went across the street to a bar and tried to figure out what had happened. It should not have happened—not with the group I put together. All three of the teachers were well known and even revered in San Francisco. Cap was raised in San Francisco, where he had become a basketball legend. Miles was the senior vice president of the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) and the founder and editor of *California Teacher*, the CFT newspaper these teachers would have read in this strong union town. And Flossie Lewis was one of their own—one of the best-known, most-respected, and feistiest English teachers in town. It was beyond understanding why we'd been treated that way. The following week, one of the teachers called me. It seemed that the principal, a very unpopular *acting* principal who was at war with the faculty, had told teachers to show up for this workshop or else! The teachers showed up, not only to keep their files clean of reprimands, but also to get even by keeping this program from succeeding. They had nothing against us. They didn't know me. They did know Cap and Miles and Flossie, and they liked all of them. But they hated that acting principal.

That afternoon, we learned something about how to conduct a Bay Area Writing Project workshop and how not to. We vowed never again to have anything to do with mandated programs. Our workshops for teachers

would from then on always be voluntary. If teachers didn't want to attend a Bay Area Writing Project workshop, they didn't have to, and we would make this very clear to teachers and administrators.

### BAWP Bombs at Acalanes

There are many ways for a workshop to go wrong, and our next workshop for the Acalanes School District led to another misadventure. We had learned from the institute that a demonstration should not be entirely a lecture—that teachers in the workshop need to participate in the activity and respond just as students do. But the director of English of the Acalanes School District had another idea. I was so impatient to get something going, I was quite willing to do what the district wanted, that is: "Bring along your *hotshots*, four or five of your best teachers, not just one," the director said, "and have each of them briefly present what it is they do to teach writing." My instincts told me that a series of "Here's what I do" sessions would not work, but I knew how strong the teachers were, and I believed they might pull it off.

When I arrived at the district office, "hotshots" in tow, and entered our meeting room, I looked out onto a large room, cold and intimidating, filled with hard chairs set out in rigid rows. We faced a roomful of teachers who also seemed cold and intimidating. The director of English handled the introductions: "Teacher One, Teacher Two, Teacher Three, Teacher Four," he said, like his guests were contestants on the *Dating Game*. It was terrible. Our teachers had never faced anything like this before. They stood like sticks and hardly knew what to say, racing through their little talks like shy twelve-year-olds rather than the professionals they were. The next day, the director of English who had planned this fiasco

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distributed his curriculum newsletter to teachers and administrators throughout the district with the headline “BAWP BOMBS.” I had the feeling he enjoyed putting that newsletter together, that he didn’t mind at all seeing the “hotshots” lose a round. But we had learned another lesson. We had been asked to do something we did not want to do. We would not do it again.

### **BAWP Discovers Its Inservice Model**

Our next workshop was to give us a model for the way we would conduct staff development from then on. Shortly after our early mishaps, I received a phone call from Vi Tallman, language arts coordinator for the Stanislaus County Office of Education, inviting me to conduct a UC Extension course on the teaching of writing. I had taught such a course on two previous occasions, and the county office wanted to continue this focus on writing. I told Vi a little about the new project we had at Berkeley and asked if she would mind if I handled the course a little differently this time by bringing along some of the outstanding teachers I had worked with during our recent institute. Vi didn’t care how I handled it: “Anything you want. Anything.” I made the trip to Modesto alone for the first session, but for each of the next nine weeks I arranged to chauffeur a different teacher from the institute—Miles Myers, Mary K. Healy, Barney Tanner, Cap Lavin, Keith Caldwell, and others—to the Stanislaus County Office on Thursday afternoons to conduct a three-hour workshop on the teaching of writing. I taxied each of the nine teachers to Modesto and back, a distance of about two hundred miles, took them all out to dinner, and from the thousand dollars I received from the county office for teaching the course, I wrote a personal check for fifty dollars to each of the teacher-consultants. I kept what was left as my share for serving as

series coordinator. I thought this was fair all around. The early bookkeeping for the project was casual.

The audience of Modesto teachers had never experienced a program anything like this before: real classroom teachers demonstrating their own practices—approaches that fellow teachers had found successful in their own classrooms, one great teacher after another for ten straight weeks. Each week they were introduced to something new about teaching writing. Each week, in these three-hour sessions, they were given the time to experiment with these different teaching practices by doing the writing that students would do and then reading what they had written to other teachers in small response groups. After two or three weeks, I always gave some time over to the teachers so they could comment on how well these different practices had worked in their own classrooms in the preceding week, and these comments usually triggered further discussions about the teaching of writing.

For many, this was the first time they had ever come together with a group of fellow teachers to talk about writing and the teaching of writing. They loved it. They began talking about this new class to other teachers. A few local school administrators who were also beginning to hear about what was happening on Thursday afternoons began showing up. Vi became a regular guest along with one of her colleagues from the county office; even the county superintendent of schools attended one session. And so it began. BAWP was at work in the schools, and it had discovered its program design in Modesto: ten three-hour sessions, adding up to the thirty-hour UC Extension requirement for credit; a different classroom teacher as instructor at each workshop; and a coordinator who had an active role at each session. Over the next eight

years, BAWP was invited to conduct four additional series in Modesto. The Merced County Office, having heard about this new UC Berkeley project at county office meetings, invited BAWP to do the same for the next two years—even Fresno County wanted BAWP, but the location was too far away.

Something was happening in the world of staff development. BAWP had established an aura. The telephone began to ring, and BAWP has been scheduling multiple inservice programs throughout the Bay Area ever since.

### **The Second Summer Institute**

We did some fine-tuning for the second institute, to improve how we handled the demonstrations, the writing, and the response groups. But we didn’t fine-tune enough. The second summer institute came close to being a total disaster, and that we didn’t die right then and there clearly speaks to the power of the writing project’s teacher-centered model to withstand and overcome even major disruptions.

The major disruption the second summer was a giant of a man with heavy curly black hair and a full black mustache who dressed—every day—in full black leather. He was also a magnificent writer whose prized possession was his motorcycle. That summer he wrote stunning pieces about the feel and thrill of riding fast on quiet country roads, windblown and free. He was an assistant professor of English at UC Berkeley with particular interest in seventeenth-century English poetry—and he was the most difficult human being I’ve ever had to deal with. Each morning he’d come late to the institute, stand in the doorway, glowering and scowling, looking for a chair, frequently disrupting whatever was going on—often nothing he was much interested



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in anyway. When he was bored or turned off, he sometimes would reach down into his black leather briefcase, pull out *Rolling Stone*, and begin reading. When he heard teachers say things about writing or teaching that he disagreed with, he would let us all know about it in some way or other, even to the point of yelling out “Bullshit!” He was, for many, totally intimidating. Yet, I couldn’t believe that I couldn’t fix things somehow. After all, I had twenty years of teaching experience behind me by this time, and I had dealt with difficult students, but nothing I had experienced in those earlier days helped me this time. He was clearly making many teachers uncomfortable, and on occasion had some close to tears. And yet while some found him a challenge, others found him fascinating.

One day early in the institute this problem professor gave a formal presentation, standing behind a podium that he had brought with him and reading a paper prepared for the occasion on the overuse of the verb “to be,” the only time any teacher or any guest has read a formal paper in the history of the Bay Area Writing Project. His take on “to be” led to a heated argument. One teacher spent that evening looking up every memorable passage he could find in poetry and prose featuring some form of “to be” and made copies that he passed around to all the next morning.

Some savored these electric exchanges, some were clearly attracted to him personally, and a good number of teachers agreed wholeheartedly with his insistence that the institute should focus solely upon improving the writing of the expository and argumentative essay. But another sizable group argued strongly for personal writing and for giving students the freedom to write about whatever they wanted to write about. It was

in this sharp division that I found the solution.

Either the next day or the day after, I told the group of a major change I was making. We would divide the institute for the rest of the summer into two totally separate groups that could focus on their own interests, meeting in different rooms and coming together only for guest speakers and our weekly Thursday evening pot luck dinners. The teachers were more than satisfied and, strangely enough, did not think this drastic solution odd. They even gave each other pet names: the Hard-Noses and the Touchy-Feelies.

The experiment of the two institutes in two different rooms might have satisfied the teachers, but once I set it up, I found it impossible. It simply was not true to the heart of the project. The project I had envisioned was about talented teachers coming together and sharing their expertise, respecting and learning from their varied approaches. It was not about choosing up sides about how or what to teach. At the end of the fourth week, I called a halt to this 1975 summer institute. It was tearing the model apart. I invited everyone to a backyard barbecue at my home with plenty of good food and drink—which seemed to give our time together that summer a happy ending.

Looking back, I understand that this disaster (at least it seemed so at the time) might have been avoided if we had had in place the interview process that by the third year had become a key element of the summer institute. But for the first two years, interviews were not part of our selection process. For our first institute, I invited many of the teachers I had worked with in one way or another and knew to be excellent, and those I had not known were

recommended by colleagues I respected.

The summer fellows the following year were selected in much the same way, but when that difficult institute was over, I knew from then on we would have a selection process with the final cut based on a personal interview. Ever since, we have used the interview to learn a great deal about each teacher, and to give teachers a chance to learn more about BAWP. We talk about the special nature of our teacher-centered project, and teachers talk about their approaches to teaching writing, telling us what they do and why they do it. But this experience during the second summer institute taught us we were not looking for only the “hotshots.” We were looking for teachers who can respect and learn from their talented colleagues, who can accept our assumption that there is no single best way to teach writing. Initiating a selection process the third year turned out to be a major event in the refinement of the Bay Area Writing Project model.

Reflecting now on the ups and downs of our first year, I am tempted to say of some of our misturns, “Why didn’t we think of that? It seems so obvious.” Yet at the time nothing was obvious. Everything was new. We discovered during this early struggle a teachers-at-the-center model relevant then, now, and in the future.

**JAMES GRAY** enjoyed a distinguished career as an English teacher and teacher-educator before he launched the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974. For the next twenty years, he worked to advance the writing project model, which now flourishes at 167 NWP sites at colleges and universities in forty-nine states. Gray retired as NWP executive director in 1994, but remains active as a member of NWP’s board of directors.

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