Red Cedar Writing Project’s 20th Anniversary

Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on.

—Louis L’Amour
RCWP DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Any recognition of important College of Arts and Letters anniversaries would be incomplete without acknowledging the 20th anniversary of Red Cedar Writing Project (RCWP), MSU’s site of the National Writing Project (NWP). In 1992, CAL Associate Dean for Outreach and Community Engagement, Dr. Janet Swenson, joined colleagues Professor Emeritus Patricia Lambert Stock, Professor Emeritus Sharon Thomas, and now retired Lansing Sexton High School teacher Dr. Diana Mitchell in filing an application to establish a site of the NWP at MSU. Dr. Swenson has remained at the helm across the project’s entire 20-year span, and her research has been closely interwoven with her project leadership.

Swenson’s work as director has been complemented by the contributions of several RCWP school-based co-directors: Toby Kahn Loftus (retired Detroit Dewey Center for Urban Education middle school teacher) serves as the director of RCWP’s Petoskey satellite, Top of the Mitt Writing Project, which offers a wide array of programming for northern Michigan teachers and students. And a variety of project-sponsored initiatives for teachers and K-12 students in the mid-Michigan area are directed by:

- Mitch Nobis (Birmingham Seaholm High School English teacher)
- Dawn Reed (Okemos High School English teacher) and
- Renee Webster (Perry Elementary School teacher)

When interviewed about her work with the project, Swenson noted that RCWP has been the beneficiary of both the direct and indirect support of her colleagues in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures (WRAC), where she is a professor. She explained that some of her colleagues, such as Professors Danielle DeVoss and Nancy DeJoy, and CAITLAH Co-Director Dr. Ellen Cushman, have worked directly with RCWP teachers.

“Just as importantly,” Swenson continued, “the groundbreaking work that is being done by such WRAC digital writing scholars as Chair Jeff Grabill, WRAC Graduate Chair Bill Hart Davidson, and Documentary Lab coordinator Dr. Bump Halbritter, along with the work of cultural studies faculty such as Professors Malea Powell and Julie Lindquist and CAITLAH Co-Director Dr. David Kirkland, have greatly influenced my own work and the work of the RCWP teachers.”

THE NWP MODEL AND RCWP

Swenson notes that the NWP model requires sites such as RCWP to establish an annual invitational summer institute. In this intensive four-week, full-day institute, teachers who are selected for participation focus on three areas of inquiry:

1. Their own and one another’s behaviors as writers as they engage in a wide array of writing experiences
2. The implications of recent research related to effective writing curricula, materials and pedagogies
3. An analysis of the ways in which every episode of teaching has distilled within it a teacher’s philosophy of education and beliefs about theories of writing, teaching and learning, and the roles of teachers, students, contexts and cultures.

“At the conclusion of the institute,” Swenson says, “participating teachers become NWP teacher consultants, a credential recognized at more than 200 university-based NWP sites.”

Dr. Swenson adds that the model also requires that project sites continue to develop the leadership skills of its teacher consultants by offering them “continuity programming” (continued professional development opportunities) and the preparation to further develop their professional leadership skills by:

- Facilitating professional development for other teachers,
- Researching their own practices,
- Publishing in both print and conference presentations, and
- Leading youth programs.
RCWP: AN NWP “FLAGSHIP”

NWP peer reviewers have called RCWP a “flagship” for the National Writing Project and substantiated that claim by identifying the wide range of ways in which RCWP has offered leadership to the broader network. As the only NWP site to earn an “Exemplary” rating after only its first year of operation, RCWP has continued to attract the attention of other NWP sites for innovations associated with each of the core requirements and also with the research and scholarship Dr. Swenson has developed related to the teaching of writing and teacher professional development.

In 1997, when Dr. Swenson was invited to become a national facilitator of the DeWitt Wallace “Readers Digest”-funded Project OUTREACH (with 15 sites in 12 states focused on the specific professional development needs of teachers teaching writing in low income communities), she invited RCWP teachers to study their work with teachers and students in Detroit, Flint, and several low-income Michigan rural communities.

“The result,” Swenson says, “was the introduction of new programming for the NWP identified as Composing Connections between Classrooms and Communities, through which teachers shared with one another the ways in which they could help students employ their writing as a way of transforming the communities in which they live.”

In 2004, after Senator Jay Rockefeller successfully campaigned for an increase in National Writing Project federal funding to support increased work on integrating technology into the teaching of writing, RCWP’s colleagues identified it as one of five “NWP Lead Technology Sites.”

“Drawing on the work of Gunther Kress and the New London Group,” Dr. Swenson says, “RCWP teachers and I worked to develop and field-test a method of offering K-12 teachers technology-enriched professional development that we named WIDE PATHS (Writing in Digital Environments: Pedagogies and Theories). We exhorted one another, as the name suggests, to create clear, inviting pathways for our colleagues to traverse as they build their skills at both using technology as a tool to increase student learning, and their skill in helping students communicate effectively in digital environments.”

In 2006, after more than a decade of work with teachers on various methods of analyzing approaches to teaching writing in ways that have the potential to reveal important insights for both teachers and participant-observers, Swenson worked with colleague Dr. Diana Mitchell to develop a monograph on the subject. The tract combined the work she had been doing on defining the characteristics of “transformative teacher networks” with methods of articulating beliefs about effective teaching:

“Our goal has always been to collaborate with RCWP participants to further develop the type of community that helps each of us improve our practice. Jerome Bruner, in his text “The Culture of Education,” describes these as ‘enabling communities,’ groups of colleagues who help us deal with the impermanence and instability of our broader culture and, in particular, of our profession. Enabling communities understand that ‘the process of becoming aware of practice...is an antidote to mindlessness. And mindlessness is one of the major impediments to change’ (1996).

As Bahktin (1993) has suggested, thoughtful responses allow us to reunite our performed acts of teaching with their ‘products’—changes in the beliefs, knowledge, and/or performance of the teachers in our summer institute—and in this process to identify, individually and collaboratively, the generalizable strengths that form the foundation for high-quality approaches to teaching writing.”
MORE CELEBRATION TO COME

Even as the more than 300 teachers affiliated with RCWP have been celebrating the project’s 20th anniversary this year, they are looking forward to two additional years of celebration.

This summer marks the 20th anniversary of Greenrock, a residential writing retreat for high school students. RCWP co-director and Okemos High School teacher Dawn Reed, along with former MSU graduate student and University of South Florida faculty member Dr. Luke Rodesiler, co-direct Greenrock. Before arriving on campus in late June, students read a text that helps to establish the workshop theme and offers an opportunity to “read like a writer.” During the long weekend, they discuss the reading and the insights it offers to them as student writers, write in a wide range of genre, participate in a “writing marathon” at sites around the campus, take in a Summer Circle Theatre production, and end the weekend by painting and signing The Rock in front of the Auditorium to “leave their mark on MSU.”

Approximately 40 percent of each summer’s cohort are returning students, and the directors have had the happy challenge of addressing the pleas of students who have graduated from high school, but aren’t yet ready to stop attending Greenrock.

During the summer of 2014, Spartan Writing Camp, RCWP’s summer day camps for elementary and middle school students, led by Perry Elementary School teacher Renee Webster, will celebrate its 20th anniversary. Each summer, more than 300 students attend approximately 30 different camps facilitated by RCWP teachers that range in focus from “Digital Writing: From Cameras to Computers” to “Sports Write Now!” and from Middle School Poets’ Club to “Stand Up!: Writing Our Opinions.” For the first time, this summer, Spartan Writing Camp is also offering sessions for parents, guardians, and other family members who would like ideas on how they can continue to support their student writers at home.

Photo above: 2012 Greenrock students head to the International Center. Summer 2013 marked the 20th anniversary of Greenrock, a residential writing retreat for high school students.

MAJOR RECOGNITION CONTINUES FOR RWCP

Dr. Swenson and the teachers affiliated with Red Cedar Writing Project continue to be recognized by colleagues within the state, within the NWP and across the nation. They have also been recognized here at MSU as the second MSU recipients of the University Outreach Scholarship and Community Engagement Award in 2009, and of the University Curricular Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Award winners in 2012.

In nominating Dr. Swenson and RCWP for these awards, teachers shared comments such as these:

“This was the most valuable graduate course and professional development experience I have ever had. I have had to work harder and do more work in this course than I ever have before, but I also gained more than I ever have. What an extraordinary experience! I have never had a more inspiring and positive instructor.”

“She works tirelessly, selflessly, and energetically as a mentor, teacher, administrator, scholar and friend.”

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SERVED

Such praise has a foundation: In only the most recent five years, RCWP has offered nearly 6,000 hours of programming for nearly 5,000 teachers and students, nearly 40 percent of them from Title I schools (schools composed primarily of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches).

Although this article focuses primarily on RCWP’s past, Dr. Swenson and the teachers affiliated with the project continue to look forward to the future. As MUSES was going to press celebrating the successes of RCWP over the past 20 years, Dr. Swenson learned that she and the project have received a $200,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Education. The grant will allow them to work closely with Flint Carman-Ainsworth High School teachers across the next year on methods of generatively integrating technology into their teaching of writing, and on engaging students in writing that has the potential to strengthen their local community.