

The Quarterly

OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT
AND THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

Volume 11, Number 3

ISSN 0896-3592

Summer 1989

Sarah Warshauer Freedman

Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures

Cool J., a thoughtful and articulate ninth-grade boy tracked in a very low level English class in the San Francisco Bay Area, after a year of being involved in a cross-cultural exchange of writing between his class and a class in London, reveals in an interview, "It's really new and fun to write to an audience, you know, not just write to your teacher. Good experience I guess." Cool J. (he chose the pen name) is in one of four urban inner-city classes in the Bay Area paired with four similar classes in London. These eight classes exchanged writing throughout the 1987-88 school year and are part of an in-depth cross-cultural study of the teaching and learning of writing in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The reports of these writing exchanges show how students, many of whom have a history of failure in school, through writing in a personally meaningful and engaging school context, can begin to change their status in school. The writing exchanges demonstrate that to help these young adolescents succeed, schools must make radical changes, changes that reach far beyond what the current educational reform movement is considering. Most important, the students must be allowed to write honestly, and, through their writing, to come to terms with their personal lives—even when those lives are sometimes not so pretty, when they include problems dealing with drug abuse in their neighborhoods, the mental illness of a parent, the ravages of family alcoholism, the traumas of teenage pregnancy. The exchanges are designed not only to allow but to encourage students to bring their lives and their language into the school context before an audience of peers and teachers who take them, their experiences, and their writing seriously. As the

continued on next page

INSIDE

Real Voices for Real
Audiences
by Joan Cone . . . p. 3

London Calling
by Susan Reed . . . p. 5

The Response Factor
by Kate Chapman . . . p. 7

Editor's Note . . . p. 9

Building a Literate Community
by Angus Dunstan . . . p. 10

Book Reviews
by Art Peterson and Jerry
Herman . . . p. 15

Center Update . . . p. 20

Electronic Writing: The
Autobiography of a Collabora-
tive Adventure
by Jane Zeni Flinn . . . p. 22

Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures

continued from previous page

students' lives and experiences are valued by others, they begin to value themselves—and to see how writing and literacy fit into their lives. They build social connections to writing; and on this firm base, their academic writing can grow and develop.

Since writing is exchanged between students in the United States and the United Kingdom, the exchanges also allow us to compare the teaching and learning of writing in the two countries. Through earlier U.S. and U.K. national surveys of highly successful teachers and their students at the secondary level, we have found a number of critical differences in how students are viewed by their teachers and how they learn. First, teachers in the U.K. stress imaginative writing while teachers in the U.S. stress critical thinking. Second, U.K. teachers think it more important to attend to the needs of individual learners than U.S. teachers, while U.S. teachers are more inclined to expend their energies developing the curriculum than are their U.K. counterparts. In both countries teachers focus on their students' writing and learning processes; at the secondary level their students focus on their written products and the grades they receive.

The U.K. emphasis on the individual learner and the concomitant value placed on the imagination provide a firm educational base for meeting the needs of a diverse student body. Irene Robertson, one of the U.K. teachers in the exchange project, sent some ironic pieces from her students to the U.S. in which she shows both how she admits her students' personal lives into her classroom and how she treats her students seriously, as imaginative individuals who do not all fit into the cultural mainstream. Her students have described their neighborhood in Tottenham, which one would imagine from reading the U.K. popular press is virtually a black ghetto where the young are lawless, the police are brutal, and there is constant racial conflict. That picture is a gross distortion, but the district does have many problems and the students know it. Says Robertson:

I know that one of the things that students these days feel they have to do, when they talk about Tottenham, talk about...living in Tottenham, is...they have to try to distance themselves, from...everybody's stereotypes of that area, and I think irony enables them to distance themselves, without...without them becoming totally hostile to it, and that's important, because after all it is the place where they're going to go on living, and I was quite delighted with a lot...a lot of their remarks about the area, and I just thought that was a different way of writing. It wasn't just pleasant chat about "Here am I, and this is who

I am, and this is what I do." It was actually offering a discourse on a different level. (Interview, March 13, 1989)

As they work with the exchanges, the U.S. teachers provide examples of how individual and diverse students can be similarly valued in an American educational context. Much of the writing these U.S. teachers allow and even encourage would be banned in traditional classrooms. However, the further these teachers push toward making radical departures from standard practice that are presupposed by the exchange, the more likely their students are to grow academically, to find personal and social connections to writing and ultimately to learning.

Joan Cone and Susan Reed from the U.S., and Kate Chapman from the U.K., write about their own and their students' experiences being part of an audience exchange. Cone teaches English at El Cerrito High School in El Cerrito, California, which serves ethnically diverse students from both middle class and low income urban neighborhoods. Her five-course teaching load includes two sections of twelfth-grade Advanced Placement English, one tenth-grade honors class, and two ninth-grade remedial classes, one of which participated in the audience exchange project. Cone became involved in the second year of the exchange project and participated in the project for one year.

Reed teaches at De Anza High School, located in a low income area on the outskirts of Richmond, California. She, too, teaches five classes a day—two basic ninth-grade writing classes, two eleventh-grade honors classes, and one class for The Write Team, a cadre of writing coaches, juniors and seniors who guide and assist freshman writers. It was one of the basic ninth-grade writing classes that participated in the exchange project. Like Cone, Reed joined the exchange project in its second year and participated for one year.

Chapman teaches at Northumberland Park School in London, a school well-known for its strong English department. Northumberland Park is located in the Tottenham district of the London borough of Haringey, and many of the students' parents work locally in factories, offices, and shops. Chapman participated in our project for two years. In the second year of the project she was teaching seven classes. Because in the U.K. classes do not meet every day, this load was equivalent to a five-course load in the U.S. In addition to teaching, Chapman was also, at the time of the exchange, acting deputy head of her English department, a position entailing many administrative duties.

Sarah Warshauer Freedman is a Professor of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. She is Director of the Center for the Study of Writing.