

In the Limelight

WATERFORD MOTT HIGH SCHOOL WRITING GRANT AUGUST 1979

Norm Ballou, Project Director

In February, 1979, the Michigan Department of Education awarded the Waterford School District a \$6,000 planning grant to improve written composition by high school students. The money, from ESEA IV-C funds, was to be expended between February 7 and September 30, 1979, at Waterford Mott High School. Depending on our findings, our recommendations, their effectiveness and the availability of future funding, we may request an implementation grant to expand our program to all secondary schools in Waterford--three junior and three senior high schools.

May, 1978: Identifying the Problem

Our planning grant proposal began with a recognition of poor student writing in the high school--the "why" for curriculum change. There followed a grants' seminar conducted by Mr. Ron Arnold, Director of Instructional Services, Waterford School District--the "how" of proposal writing. At the grants' seminar (May, 1978), we suggested that writing improvement in the high school was an area that needed improvement and might well qualify for an ESEA IV-C grant through the State Department of Education. Then, since other departments had also made grant recommendations, we waited for a decision from the Waterford School District's Instructional Services Department regarding our own.

While we waited, we informed ourselves about current problems in writing and techniques for addressing those problems without any excessive expenditure of school district funds. Because ours is a middle class district with declining enrollment and a recent school millage failure, we have little money for travel to observe programs in other districts or to hire consultants. Mott's English department head attended the English Composition Board Conference at the University of Michigan on May 12, 1978. The

University's findings concerning the writing needs of entering freshmen and transfer students and the importance of writing instruction in all curricular areas were later invoked in our grant proposal.

During the summer some data on composition were collected--in a very casual, unorganized fashion--from English Journal, College English and Phi Delta Kappa.

Then, in October 1978, Ron Arnold gave us this information: (1) writing improvement was a major district priority in Waterford-Mott; (2) and writing improvement met the criteria of the Experimental/Demonstration office of the State Department of Education; therefore, (3) ours was one of the three proposals that should be formalized and submitted to the State Department of Education for consideration.

October, 1978: Shaping the Proposal

Our first step in writing the proposal was a five page documented narrative describing the problem, offering evidence that it existed, showing current district concern with the problem, suggesting steps in its solution, specifying the aim(s) of our effort, and noting how success would be measured.

Our next step was to gather additional concrete evidence of our high-school students' writing problems and to discuss within the English department at Mott some possible solutions to them. We cited evidence of poor writing from teacher observations, from surveys of parents on the effectiveness of writing instruction in Waterford schools, from the results of a voluntary basic-skills-certification (competency) exam given in March and October of 1978, and from surveys of vocational program graduates in 1974 and 1976. We also noted the findings and purpose of the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan to show that the problem of

inadequate writing skills affects even academically talented students.

We had very few solutions to suggest. Indeed, the purpose of our proposal was to buy time to develop a plan that would identify specific strategies to address the problem of our students' poor writing performance.

After gathering this evidence, the English department head, with guidance from the Director of Instructional Services, made out the project application, which in our case consisted of a two-page abstract and an eleven-page proposal expanding the previously written narrative.

As we waited for a response to our proposal, we continued to learn what we could. Specific advice came from two sources. Dr. Robert Graham of Oakland Schools helped us at this time and later. He gave us multiple copies of classroom-tested materials on teaching composition that were developed by and for Oakland County English teachers. On October 31, 1978, three of our English teachers attended a seminar on holistic scoring presented by J. Evans Alloway of ETS.

February, 1978: Tapping the Resources

By February our proposal was approved, and Rebecca Rankin, Mott's principal, together with Ron Arnold and Norm Ballou, Mott's English department head, traveled northward to Lansing to attend a planning grants start-up session and meet some of the instructional specialists of the Michigan Department of Education.

By February 28, 1979, we had determined which of Mott's English teachers would be available for a two-week workshop; we had selected four teachers from other departments for a one-week cross-curricular writing workshop; and we had submitted summer workshop requests and a budget breakdown for our planning grant.

On March 4, three of our English teachers attended the ASCD conference in Detroit to learn about the Northern Virginia Writing Project, a derivative of the Bay Area Writing Project.

On March 21, Bernard Van't Hul and Alan Howes made an ECB visit to Mott and spoke to the entire Mott staff and many district administrators in the morning and the English department and department heads from our other two high schools in the afternoon. Their presentation was excellent, their enthusiasm contagious. Had we been prepared, we could have had a cross-curricular writing commitment from our staff that very day.

On April 26, the department head attended an ECA writing seminar conducted by Miles Olson of the University of Colorado.

On May 2, three English teachers attended a presentation by Stephen Dunning at the Oakland Schools.

Three teachers and our principal were in attendance during the three-day ECB workshop in June at the University of Michigan, and we came back to Mott full of good ideas.

Fall, 1979: Facing the Future

Now, two weeks before the opening of school in September, we have completed our three weeks of in-service workshops and a significant amount of research on writing. We have determined that our English department now meets or will soon meet each of the nineteen NCTE criteria published in March, 1979, as "Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs." We have compiled a list of specific methods and techniques to be used in our writing courses (emphasizing process, varying audience, grouping, conferencing, prompt feedback from teachers, frequent writing, writing assessments, writing files, practicing pre-writing, publicizing good writing, creating a non-threatening atmosphere, and so on). We have begun accumulating a professional library on composition; and we have developed a
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Editorial (cont. from p. 2)

school of thought; or it will treat a topic important to the teacher of writing.

We are especially gratified that after we decided to make the work of Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow the thematic center of this first issue of fforum, each of them agreed to write a brief piece especially for fforum readers. We are delighted, furthermore, by similar commitments from several authors who will be featured in future issues.

Balancing fforum's informational component will be one for discussion. At this exciting time of a first issue, we ask you to react to content and format and to tell us what you might wish were here. It is our intention to serve your needs and interests. Please address your letters to:

Patti Stock

fforum

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At present, we are assembling materials for issues dealing with schools of thought represented by the following writers: (1) Sheridan Baker, Edward Corbett, and John Warriner; and (2) James Britton and James Moffett. We hope you will write for one of these issues. If you are interested in contributing an article, please let us know as soon as possible.

Several other features of fforum specifically need your input. In each issue we plan to place "In the Limelight" a teacher, school, or school district doing work in the state which is of interest to all of us. We need you to share your newsworthy projects with us if we are to make others aware of them. In the feature "Between Classes," we will publish your poetry or prose or that of your students if you will share these with us. Finally, in their column "From the Guidance Office," a team of resident experts, Drs. Fidditch and Foilitch, are

ready to tackle, or grapple with, any and all professional problems you call to their attention. We plan to share with you in "ECB Reports" as well as providing an "ECB FreeB" in each issue. The "FreeB" is a lesson plan (complete with duplicatable materials) offered for your consideration.

There is this to say about "copyright": Everything that appears in fforum is intended for your use. For that reason there are no restrictions at all on any use you wish to make of it.

And this, about receiving fforum: This first issue is being sent to all secondary schools, colleges, and universities in Michigan. If you wish to continue to receive fforum or to begin receiving it, please notify us. There is no charge for subscription.

And this, about thank you's: To those of you who wrote for this first issue, who agreed to meet an unrealistic deadline, who encouraged the editor with your enthusiasm, thank you.

And this, for Bernard Van't Hul and Dan Fader: THANK YOU.

Waterford Mott (cont. from p. 18)

packet of materials and suggestions for increasing the amount of writing in non-English courses which we will offer to the entire staff.

Much of our effort is in staff development. If we can help teachers feel confident as teachers of writing, not significantly increasing their paper load, and let them see writing improvement in their students, we will have succeeded as staff development consultants. If we can help students feel confident as writers, significantly increasing their paper load, and let them see their own writing improvement, we will have succeeded as teachers.

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