

Teaching teachers to write improves classroom performance

BY ROCHELLE PERRELLA

There was an unusual sound in the corridor of Andrew Hall, UNL English building, during early morning class-time.

The sound of laughter came floating out into the hallway.

Was this a social gathering of old friends or a class being conducted?

What constitutes this change of atmosphere in comparison to other classrooms?

Where does this sense of community come from in a class of 25 people who were strangers to one another less than five weeks before?

The scene examined above is the classroom of the Nebraska Literature Project. This is an off-shoot or "spin off" of the Nebraska Writers Project that has been taught for four years at UNL.

The initiator of these projects is Les Whipp, English professor at UNL.

Whipp is currently conducting the writers project and James McShane is conducting the literature project.

These two classes differ in many ways from the regular English classes at UNL.

Each member of the classes has been hand-picked.

All of the members are teachers. These people are professionals coming together to share experiences, techniques and teaching methods.

The emphasis of both classrooms deals with writing.

Whipp said that the class encourages the teachers to start writing themselves. A teacher who is writing himself for pleasure can more effectively teach writing in the classroom. A teacher who is writing can better understand the special problems of an author, and thus teach literature more effectively.

"The main notion is that you respond to other people's writing differently when writing yourself," Whipp said.

Both class situations are set up similarly.

The classes first meet as large groups. Minutes are taken for every session and read the next day. Teaching demonstrations are also given by people in the class.

The classes then divide into small writing groups. Each person presents one piece of his writing to the group. His peers then give their reactions.

Lastly, the large groups reassemble for a time of sharing reports and the paper blizzard (handouts contributed by people in the class as teaching aids for the others in the class.)

Whipp said that the best evaluation for such a class period is to take 10 minutes at the end of the period to ask people what they have learned.

Whipp said that he would like class participants to realize that writing is the imperfect effort of real people to create something joyful and meaningful.

The classes are scheduled from 9 a.m. to whenever the class feels that they are done. They meet five days a week.

The writing class usually adjourns at approximately 12:30 p.m.; and the literature class usually stays until approximately 2:20 p.m.

The sense of community that vibrates from these classes are in response to the amount of time spent in class and the closeness of working with other people day to day.

Whipp said that other classes have sprung up as a result of the writing project.

There is a similar class taught during the regular school year for undergraduates.

The classes designed for teachers range in grade level from kindergarten to college level.

There have also been sections taught strictly for college instructors.

In the past three years, teachers who have been through the writing program give workshops throughout the state, from Chadron to Omaha.

For every teacher that participates in the summer program, any number of other teachers may be effected, Whipp said.

In the four years this program has been taught, teachers have noticed a change.

"Students are learning differently," Whipp said. "More writing that's creative is being taught."

Whipp said that he believes UNL has an obligation to meet the needs of the communities.

"This project is part of the University's business in serving the state," Whipp said.

The project also contains personal growth for the participants, Whipp said. Many former students publish regularly. Some have started groups of writers that get to-

Two UNL students receive \$1000

Two UNL students have been named recipients of \$1000 Phillips Petroleum Scholarships for the 1981-82 academic year.

Receiving the scholarships were Edward Medlin, an electrical engineering major from Omaha, and Chris Heng, a chemical engineering major from Nebraska City.

gether regularly to give each other feedback on their work.

"Without joy in language there is no language growth," Whipp said.

The reactions from the people in the writing project were favorable.

Bob Beadell, former teacher at Lincoln East High, said, "It's been a great experience. I have gotten a lot written. The demonstrations have been good."

Because of the different grade levels, it is easier to see the total spectrum of teaching, Beadell said.

Pat Pirtle, of Indian Hills Junior High in Omaha, said that he was not writing before, but will now take the time. He has become more comfortable with writing and sees the changing techniques.

Kris Raasch of York Elementary School said, "The small groups were effective." She was also aware of how some principles of the class were applicable to the first grade level, she said.

The comments of the literature class were also favorable.

Tome Goble, of Bloomfield Elementary School in Keston, said, "The class has been very successful." He said that the class had taught him to read creatively and teach creatively.

Wynn Nuckolls, formerly of Southeast Community College in Fairbury, said that she thinks that writing in class has helped her to understand how literature is created. "This class has brought out the best in people," she said.

Reg Dyck, of South High in Omaha, said that he has enjoyed getting different ideas and methods for teaching from other class members. However, he said that the class could be more structured.

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