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Teacher Transformation through Residential Summer Programs

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I was lucky to have extensive contacts in England, and so I proposed creating an eight-week summer program (first in York and later in Oxford) that would provide between 25 and 30 American teachers of English with direct contact with British practicing whole language, or "personal growth", methods of teaching English. Further, a cornerstone of this program would be to give to these American teachers both the stimulus and the freedom to take risks and attempt their own language investigations. After a rich morning of hands-on activities -- exploring literature, creative dramatics, writing, art, and teaching-learning strategies -- teachers were encouraged during the remainder of the day to pursue projects, both in reading and writing, that captured their interests and imaginations. Thus teachers, drawing from endless possibilities, might write poetry, read a number of works by a particular novelist, inquire into the ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, or develop materials for their next year's students. And in this "free time" teachers would be working sometimes by themselves and sometimes in pair or small groups. Further, the faculty would be constantly available for informal tutorials as the need arose.

The problem in school very often is trusting students to spend their time wisely when they are not immediately controlled by a teacher-directed curriculum or set of assignments. What happens when students are allowed to follow what matters to them? We seem to be so dependent upon the teacher's agenda that we end up becoming passive learners, out of touch with our own intentions--"Just tell me what to do." And then when we become teachers we just continue a similar cycle of passivity and dependence because our own experience has led us to lose faith in the possibilities of student autonomy and innovation. Might it come about that teachers would begin to reverse their domineering stance toward students once someone began to show a little trust in their own creativity and in their own ability to define what they wanted to study. But as always the challenge faced by the faculty would be how to keep our fingers significantly out of the pie. If it was my plan to get teachers to be more comfortable with a natural and more spontaneous flow of events in the classroom, then I too had to be willing to just let things happen and not organize to death. I had to let us learn from mistakes and failures, frustrations and anxieties, because there would be a lot of pressure on me to fall back into "normal" routines as teachers subtly schemed to escape from the freedom I sought to offer them.

The New York University Program that emerged from this risky way of thinking about adult education has now been going on for 17 summers. Counting many
important professionals among its graduates, including Mary K. Healy, it continues to experiment with ways of encouraging teacher change and development. In large part it derives its transformational magic by operating in a setting that is free of the normal constraints of the academy. As the teachers study and work together they begin to understand that they finally are the ones responsible for negotiating and creating the necessary conditions of a learning community. Thus they find themselves not just attending classes, but sharing responsibility for the range of activities that naturally derive from the imperatives of residential living. As co-administrator of the program, I of course lay out broad goals for the summer and hire a number of British faculty to work with the teachers on new ideas and activities; still, much of the time remains unstructured. This means the teachers must plan how they are going to use and spend their time, both individually and in groups. They are thus responsible for organizing everything from writing-support sessions to entertainment gatherings and performances and, further, each summer in climaxed by a publication of teachers' writings that is selected and put together by the teachers themselves.

In short, a concern for how we learn together involves a concern for how we live together — the kinds of human relationships we value and enact. Accordingly, considerable time is spent sensitizing ourselves to how we communicate with each other within the group. We reflect on power relationships in the classroom, on how we need to create spaces that make it safe for all participants to develop their own voice. We question how people are silenced and how differing gender expectations confuse and frequently sabotage conversation. What constantly amazes me is how as teachers we too are carrying around fears about learning — we often lack confidence in ourselves as readers and writers and so avoid creative situations as we resist being “exposed”. Public disclosure and discussion of these apprehensions, sharing stories of past educational disappointments and abuses, ends up going a long way toward liberating a new spirit and self-esteem among these teachers. As we talk about ourselves as learners, we come to acknowledge that weakness and intimacy have an important role to play in education. All of which means finally that as university faculty we have begun to transform our own teaching in terms of openness and respect because these summer residential programs have wonderfully forced us to become more tentative and to explore the true value of vulnerability in the classroom.