



Second-grade teacher, Lodi Loder, writes during the Findley Elementary Community of Writers workshop.

Building a Community of Writers in Oregon Schools

by Larry Colton

Photos by Adam Bacher

"In order to help children develop as writers, we need to share in the writing process by being writers ourselves. By providing demonstrations of writing in action, by being partners in the creating process, we do more to help children figure out how to be writers themselves than all of our correcting of their 'mistakes' can ever hope to accomplish."

It's late January 2007, and workshop instructor Peter Sears eyes the principal and four teachers sitting and talking at a table in the corner of Beaverton's Findley Elementary School library. He eases in their direction, smiling slyly, like a teacher moving in to quiet a rowdy table. They notice him approaching and invite him to join their table. He pulls up an empty chair.

"I like this prompt," says Jan Smith, the principal

Sears nods. "Having great prompts is half the battle," he says.

Smith and her staff at Findley are in the middle of the final session of the 40-hour Community of Writers' workshop, accredited through the U of O's extended campus and School of Journalism. It has been paid for out of the district's tuition reimbursement and professional development funds. Like every session, today's class has started with a seven-minute fast write, Sears having instructed the teachers to write a scene that includes a car, a song, a person and a special place. Then, when they finished the fast write, he instructed them to go back over what they'd written and change one verb...just one verb.

"Who has a new verb to show me?" he asks.

Smith raises her hand. "The original sentence read: 'Sitting in the front seat of his '65 Mustang, the Beach Boys playing on the radio, he put his arm around my shoulder.'"

"And the new verb?"

"He snuck his arm around my shoulder."

"Excellent," encourages Sears, smiling. "Teenage boys in cars like to sneak."

"Especially the ones in Mustangs," adds Smith.

"If the noun and verb are good, you almost never need an adjective."

Sears asks the other teachers at the table for examples of revised verbs and they all share their new verbs. Sears, a graduate of Yale and the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, and the winner of the Peregrine Smith 2005 Western States Poet of the Year Award, compliments each teacher for her improved verb. He has been co-teaching the Community of Writers (COW) "Teacher as Writer" workshop since 2000, the program's second year. His easy-going manner helps bring a fun and spirited atmosphere to the class; his understanding of classroom writing strategies has earned the respect of the 1,100 teachers who've participated in the program in its first eight years.

"Don't forget to add this prompt to your list," he advises.

Smith smiles and takes out a notebook, adding the prompt to the four pages of prompts COW has already provided. She also adds the verb strategy to the list of twenty revision techniques already provided. Supplying teachers with mini-lesson strategies for getting kids to rewrite is one of the centerpieces of COW's program.

"How do you get kids to rewrite something that they probably didn't want to write in the first place? To students, rewriting is usually huge, overwhelming, and generally fun-free. Besides, why would they want to do over something they just finished? Wasn't finishing the goal? But we have to give these students the skills to rethink what they've just written and provide them with strategies so that when a paper is returned to them the task is not too daunting. If Dr. Suess writes one thousand pages to produce a sixty page book, then surely it's okay if a rank beginner in the first grade has to scratch something out."

For Jan Smith, this is her first year as principal at Findley, moving to the Beaverton District after 20 years with Portland. Five years earlier, she'd experienced the Community of Writers program as principal at Clark Elementary in southeast Portland, witnessing firsthand the program's success in raising tests scores at Clark. Shortly after taking the job at Findley, where



the school's Improvement Plan called for a focus on improving writing achievement, she'd made bringing the COW program to her new school a top priority. Initially, she'd encountered some reluctance from teachers, parents, and district administrators, but now, after going through the COW training, her staff of 37 has become committed converts.

"I was very hesitant at first," says Glenda Avina, a veteran of 24 years in the classroom. "But this is the best professional development program I've taken. It's changed the way I teach. I can take the strategies I learn in the workshop back to the classroom the next day and put them to work."

Smith, who is taking the workshop right along with her teachers, concurs. "We're so lucky to have COW in our school," she says. "It's so exciting to walk into teachers' classrooms and see them using these new techniques. I'm sure that tomorrow several of them will be having kids working on improving their verbs.

"It's also great to see the way our teachers now model their own writing for their students, letting them see that writing is not easy and how they have to revise

their own writing. But what makes it even more special is to see how the students respond. They are absolutely loving to write."

"Did you ever see your teacher revise anything? Probably not. In fact, most of us never saw a teacher write anything other than lesson plans, comments on a paper, or a referral. We never saw them write or revise a report, poem, story, research paper, editorial or persuasive essay."

In the COW workshop, the teachers spend fifty percent of their time working on their own writing, completing two pieces over the forty hours, one a narrative non-fiction piece, the other a fiction story. In the process of working on these stories, they meet with the professional writers who serve as instructors, including Sears. For the teachers, it is a challenging and sometimes humbling experience to have to share their drafts with real writers. Many of these teachers have not written

anything substantial since college, or even then.

"The first time I met with Peter I was really nervous," says Avina. "But he was so supportive and helpful. The one-on-one help was invaluable. The improvement between my first and second draft was night and day. It helped me see how important it is to give that same kind of attention to my students."

The other fifty percent of the workshop is dedicated to providing the teachers with strategies for the classrooms—i.e. prompts, revision techniques, mini-lessons, strategies for each trait, how to structure a writing class, how to conference with a student. Teachers receive hand-outs and constant encouragement. And lots of writing tips.

"Let the creator loose and put aside that voice in you that says be proper, conventional, rational. Don't be somebody in a tweed suit from the East Coast with a doctorate in literature who is critical of everything. Don't let your ego try to control and manipulate things."

The COW project started in 1999, with 45 teachers from ten different schools in the Portland School District going through the original training. During that first year, Northwest Regional Education Lab studied the program's impact, including an evaluation of the workshop:

"During the week, teachers learned teaching strategies, skills and tools applicable not only to teaching their students writing but also to improving their own

writing. The project created an atmosphere that teachers found relaxed, supportive, motivating, and for some, even inspirational. The instructors and guest writers/presenters were viewed as committed and professional. These two attributes in turn promoted a strong sense of community among participants that allowed teachers to build connections with others. It also enabled teachers to feel comfortable about sharing and receiving feedback from other teachers and writers on their own writing, thus truly forming a community of writers."

Since that initial workshop in 1999, the most significant change in the program has been a change from offering the program to individual teachers from many schools to focusing on whole schools, believing that the impact will be greater if the entire staff is on the same page with their writing instruction. It has also switched from offering it to all K-12 teachers, to concentrating its efforts on elementary and middle school staffs.

"We'd like to include high schools," explains Sears, "but we feel it's a better use of our resources to focus on the younger learners."

For the 2006-2007 school year, the program is working with the staffs at Atkinson and Grout Elementary Schools in Portland, Knight Elementary in Canby, and Findley in Beaverton.

"I believe Community of Writers transforms writing instruction and is the best professional development program out there!"

—Jan Smith, Principal, Findley Elementary



Facing page: Community of Writers founder and author Larry Colton provides feedback on writing in a small group discussion at the Findley Elementary writing workshop. This page: Workshop instructor and author Peter Sears reviews the writing of a Findley Elementary teacher participating in the COW workshop.

“Our fourth graders survived the State Writing Assessment in February. COW should be proud to know they spent the bulk of their time on revising without a single complaint. This isn’t my over all best group of writers, but they all are beginning to be committed to the process and I see gains across the board. It wouldn’t be happening without COW.”

—Sally Stephenson, Grout Elementary

COW does not present writing instruction for staff as a means toward improvement on Oregon’s Statewide Writing Assessment (SWA). It’s hard to ignore, however, that the scores of students in schools where teachers have gone through the project have consistently showed improvement. At Wilcox Elementary in Portland, the fifth grade scores went from 24 to 65 percent meeting benchmark in one year (2000); at Lynchwood Elementary, the fourth grade scores went from 34 to 56 percent in one year (2006); and in 2006 in the Tigard/Tualatin schools, where all nine elementary schools have been through the COW program, the fourth graders scored 57 percent district-wide (compared to 42, statewide), and seventh graders scored 62 percent district-wide (compared to 45, statewide).

While COW has achieved measurable success in improving test scores, we have always considered it more important to improve teachers’ and students’ attitudes about writing. Surveys taken over the program’s history have given evidence to success in this area, including an original study conducted by Northwest Regional

Lab in 2000. In 2006, a study of the program for a PhD dissertation by Caitlin Scott of Cleveland State University made the following conclusions:

- Longitudinal data analysis revealed that COW teachers became more positive about teaching writing as the workshops progressed.
- In interviews, more than half the teachers said that their struggles with writing during the COW workshops made them understand the writing process better and helped them empathize with their students.

“Learning to write is not linear. It is not A-B-C. We learn to write by doing it, not by reading books or taking classes. It’s like losing weight...you don’t do it by reading a book, you exercise.”

COW is a program that focuses on the writing process rather than providing a lock-step curriculum. It attempts to offer the teachers a framework for instruction, including how to structure a writing class, but it also encourages teachers to use their own creativity. As more and more districts are moving toward packaged or boxed instructional materials, such as Lucy Caulkins or Ralph Fletcher, COW is a more hands-on approach, a supplement to Caulkins and Fletcher, and much cheaper. It gives teachers a professional development experience that relates directly to classroom instruction, regardless of grade or learning level. It also understands the pressure felt by teachers, administrators and districts to meet the demands of raising student achievement and number of students meeting benchmark.



Findley Elementary teachers share their writing in a group session with instructor and author Peter Sears.

How to Tap Community of Writers

For more details about the program and information about how to get your school involved in the workshop so that it can receive the writers in residence, classroom books and family write nights, please go to www.communityofwriters.com or call (503) 546-1013.

Wordstock for Teachers

Community of Writers is the sponsor of Wordstock, the Oregon Book Festival, a world class literary event featuring some of the greatest writers in America, such as Norman Mailer, John Irving, Gore Vidal, Joyce Carol Oates. As part of Wordstock, OEA is sponsoring Wordstock for Teachers, two incredible days of workshops on K-12 writing instruction—November 9 and 10, 2007 at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland. Go to www.wordstockfestival.com to register, or call (503) 546-1012.

"As writers, we have looked at the Statewide Writing Assessment upside, downside and every way possible," says Sears. "We are not shy about telling the teachers going through our workshop that we believe the SWA is really flawed. But we do everything possible to give them the tools to provide their students the skills to do well on the test, such as strategies for organization, conventions, sentence fluency and ideas and content. We tell them over and over... 'don't try to teach to the test because that's not how writing is best taught and it's definitely not how children best learn.' Cramming three weeks of grammar and spelling tests down students' throats in hopes of upping their scores on conventions just won't work. It will have no long-term impact other than turning them off to writing."

Jan Smith supports this approach. "One of the many beauties of this program is that it allows the teachers to find their own comfort level," she says. "What might work for one teacher might not work for another. And in this model, each teacher can apply it to his or her own strengths."

"Another great benefit of the workshop is the team building. We've gotten to know each other so much better because of COW. The writing we do is difficult and sometimes painful...and cathartic. We laugh. We cry. We share. I can't overstate how important this communal gathering has meant to us. And if you talk to the teachers, every one of them will say the same thing. It has forged bonds that didn't exist before."

"Writing is a solitary endeavor but it should be communal. Borrow. Steal. Share."

As the final workshop session draws to a close, Sears addresses the Findley teachers. "You've been an incredible group to work with," he says. "In today's wacky world, the work you do with kids is often under appreciated. But not by Community of Writers. We understand the enormous difficulty and stress of your job, and we want to do everything possible to continue to support you throughout the year."

With that, he withdraws a stack of Borders gift cards from an envelope and distributes one to every teacher. Each card is worth \$300. The gift cards are part of the benefits COW supplies to each participating teacher after they've completed the workshop.

In addition, every teacher receives two weeks of a writer-in-residence from COW's roster of 45 writers that includes journalists, poets, songwriters, novelists and screenwriters. These writers, experienced in working with children and young adults, come into the classrooms and work directly with the students, bringing not only their passion for the written word, but a wide-range of unique writing assignments, most residencies producing a finished product. A third benefit COW provides is a Family Write Night hosted at the school.

Jan Smith grins as she watches the cards being handed out. She does the math: 37 teachers x \$300. "That's \$11,100 worth of books for our school," she says. "And I can't wait for the writer-in-residencies to start showing up. We had them when I was at Clark, and the excitement they bring to the school is phenomenal."

As the teachers begin to leave the room, all of them stopping to thank Sears as they exit, he eases next to Smith. "So whatever happened to that guy in the Mustang?" he asks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Larry Colton is the founder and executive director of Community of Writers. He is the only person to have pitched in the Major Leagues and been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He has also taught high school, worked for Nike, and published hundreds of magazine articles for publications such as *Esquire*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

His book *Goat Brothers* was a main selection for the Book of the Month Club. His most recent book, *Counting Coup*, was the winner of the Frankfurt e-book of the year award. He is also the founder of Wordstock, the Portland Book Festival. He is currently working on a non-fiction book about four submariners from WWII. ■