

The Professional Reader Program: A Prescription for Beleaguered English Teachers

by

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Is your briefcase stacked with papers every Friday afternoon? Has your spouse stopped asking if you want to see a movie on the weekend? Do you have early symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome? Has coffee become a staple in your "diet"? If you are a conscientious English teacher, you probably answered "Yes" to all of these questions. And "Yes," you have petitioned your principal and the school board for relief, invoking the Utopian ideal promoted by the NCTE in its 1961 publication titled *The National Interest and the Teaching of English*: "...four classes of 25 students each is the teaching load necessary for effective learning" (Allen, et.al. 89). In addition, you have used peer editing, holistic scoring, and every creative suggestion described in *English Journal* articles in an effort to reduce your paper load.

Alas, while some of these evaluation schemes brought mild relief, none significantly eased your pain. And though you agree with James Biehl that excellence "...is slipping from our grasp as the demoralizing press of an impossible work load crushes our spirits" (27), you shrug your shoulders and carry on. Given the state of the economy and the reality of district-wide budget cuts, you realize that four classes and 100 students may be nothing more than an idealist's dream. But wait a minute, even though your district may not have money to hire additional English teachers to reduce class sizes—and your paper load, there may still be other options to consider. One such option, which I have called the *Professional Reader Program* (PRP), was implemented at Northfield High School during the 1990-91 school year with local grant money. In the remainder of this article I intend to acquaint readers with the program by focusing on the following topics: (1) how the program began, (2) an outline of the grant proposal, (3) a description of the assignments evaluated by the Professional Reader—or PR, (4) a few tentative conclusions, and (5) some recommendations.

How The Program Began

Many schools have budgeted funds to hire lay readers to assist beleaguered secondary English teachers—a solution that has produced mixed results and one I did not seriously consider for this proposal. Instead, I looked at the possibility of "hiring" a professional (in this case a retired English teacher) with local education grant money. A number of school districts all over the United States have made such grants available for teachers to use on classroom and schoolwide projects. These "local education funds" (LEFs) are sometimes raised by donations from businesses or private citizens. Gerri Kay, the executive director of an organization which

coordinates the efforts of LEFs nationwide, says, in an article called "Money for the Asking," "the local education funds focus on elements that go into successful schools, making the environment conducive to learning and improving working conditions for teachers" (Schulz 34). I am not familiar with LEFs in Minnesota, though there are districts such as Edina and South St. Paul which have established foundation funds. You may need to lobby your school board to budget some money for LEF projects.

In the district in which I taught (Northfield #659) the School Board set aside \$6,000 from district-wide contingency funds for mini-grants that teachers could use to improve instruction in their classes. Since I had complained about my paper load for 29 years, I saw this mini-grant as a rare opportunity to "unload" part of that burden. So I applied for and received a \$500 grant to pilot the PRP. I chose not to call it a Lay Reader Program, for I wanted it to involve more than a community volunteer reading students' papers, correcting mechanical errors, and making a general comment or two. During the first semester of the 1988-89 school year, when I taught 84 College Prep Writing students in three classes, I sought assistance for my hefty paper load by experimenting with a volunteer lay reader program. And though I valued the help provided by my five benefactors, I found that there were a number of problems with this volunteer system. Because the lay readers did not observe my classes, it took me a great deal of time (on the phone or at the reader's home) to explain the assignments to them. In addition, while two of them had been English teachers, the other three had no background in evaluating writing and needed a good deal of training. Another problem was that of logistics—it became difficult to coordinate the efforts of so many people. And because there were five different readers with varying agendas and approaches to correcting papers, there were mixed results; some of the readers did an excellent job of helping the students while others didn't have anything to say or were perceived by the students as being too critical of their writing.

Therefore, in order to minimize some of these problems, I decided to work with only one reader on this project, a recently-retired English teacher. Such a person (Gene Fox, the former English department chair at Northfield High School and an outstanding teacher of writing) was available, and he agreed to work with me. Because of his expertise and years of successful teaching experience, I believed that the relationship we would establish should not be the one most common in lay reader programs; i.e., boss (the classroom teacher) to worker (the lay reader). Instead, this proposal was designed to foster a collegial relationship between the English teacher and the PR. Too often when public school teachers clean out their desks for the last time, they have few opportunities for service to their school, unless they choose to substitute teach. This proposal provides such an opportunity for retired English teachers—in a diminished role which the retirees may relish. When long-time college or university professors retire, they are granted emeritus status, allowed to maintain an office on campus, and given an opportunity to teach a class or two. The PRP would allow the retired English teacher to ease out of retirement and still be involved in some aspects of teaching. In

short, a program such as this is an investment in people who still have creativity, energy, and expertise to share with young people.

An Outline of the Grant Proposal

My \$500 mini-grant request was for the purpose of hiring one PR to assist in planning assignments and evaluating papers for two American literature classes and one College Prep Writing class in the spring of 1991. Given the best of all possible worlds, I had hoped for assistance with the two College Prep Writing classes I taught in the fall, but because of the inevitable bureaucratic delays, we were not able to implement the program until the spring semester. I requested that one day be allocated for the PR and me to brainstorm and write the grant proposal, and we agreed that the district's curriculum writing salary would be used to pay for this "writing time" (\$71 per day x 2 people = \$142). The remainder of the \$500 would be paid to the retired teacher at the rate of \$11 an hour. I submitted the proposal to the high school principal for approval, and implementation took place between February 28 and May 9, 1991.

During the brainstorming and writing session, the following goals were established for the PR:

1. Provide time to conference with the classroom teacher before the assignments are given. Observe in the classroom in order to get to know the students and to understand more clearly the nature of each writing task. Arrange time to conference with students if possible. Note: it was our intention that the PR should not just take papers home and read them; rather, he/she must be involved in all phases of the writing project whenever possible.
2. Establish evaluative criteria for each set of papers, making sure that students are aware of them as well.
3. Teach a writing lesson if called on to do so by the classroom teacher.
4. Read selected sets of papers, evaluating them according to the guidelines established by the classroom teacher and the PR.
5. Record hours worked—include time spent on planning, conferencing with the students and the classroom teacher, reading papers, and correcting them.
6. Assume additional responsibilities as the program develops.

After establishing these six goals, we generated a list of possible tasks that the PR might perform to accomplish the goals. You will observe in the next section of the article that we made a number of additions and changes as we implemented the project.

1. Observe the lesson(s) in which the classroom teacher presents the written assignment(s).
2. Establish evaluative criteria for each set of papers read, perhaps using a half-sheet or tab to attach to the papers.
3. Task analyze an assignment (after reading a random sample of author research papers from the American literature classes) and assist the classroom teacher in redesigning the assignment.

4. Select some of the best author research papers to be used as models the next time the assignment is given.
5. Create a new assignment for the College Prep Writing class, teach it, and correct the papers.
6. Read a set of essay exam papers composed by the College Prep Writing students.
7. Correct additional sets of papers, providing written feedback to students and general observations to the classroom teacher regarding the problems and strengths of the papers.
8. Offer only proofreading service on some sets of papers, thus allowing the classroom teacher to focus his/her evaluative comments on the content of the papers.
9. Create a model for evaluating papers that can be used by future PRs or any classroom teacher.
10. Determine the amount of time needed to complete the reading of each set of papers.

Description of the Assignments

To illustrate the diversity and scope of the Professional Reader Program, I include here a description of the assignments evaluated by the PR. First, the PR evaluated 15 randomly selected author research reports assigned to my two American literature classes. Students were required to select a favorite American author and to write a report which included the following sections: (1) a biographical sketch, (2) a summary of one novel, four short stories, or six poems written by the author, (3) a summary of critical essays about the author's work, (4) a discussion of autobiographical aspects in the author's work, and (5) a conclusion. For this assignment the PR was instructed to make brief comments about the strengths and weaknesses of each paper—paying less attention to mechanics—and to provide a critique of the assignment, concentrating particularly on common problems observed.

The second assignment was a poetry analysis paper written in the College Prep Writing class. Students selected a favorite poem, summarized it in their own words, and wrote an interpretation of the poem (focusing mainly on the meaning but also paying attention to the poet's tone of voice and use of figurative language such as metaphor and symbol). In order to assist the PR in his reading of the papers, students attached a copy of the poem with the final draft of their paper. The PR read for both mechanics and content, provided letter grades for each paper, and again furnished me with some general observations about the assignment. Since it may be instructive for readers, I have included some of these observations below:

-Most show that they understand what it means to be personally involved and to let their voices be apparent.

-Most dealt with the poems at their own levels and gave an honest account of themselves.

-Nearly all appear to be capable of using direct quotes and blending them into their own sentences.

-Common mistakes—the “usual” punctuation errors were related to mistaking a semi-colon for a colon. A drill on that might not be amiss. Also, a few need to know that commas and periods go inside quote marks. Do they know how to use block quotes?

-Many papers lacked titles. College instructors will insist.

-Most insist that the “author” is the speaker or persona of the poem. It might be useful to repeat that the poem has a voice, and it is not necessarily that of the poet.

-I would like to emphasize the importance of taking a risk as one writes. And that is true whether one is interpreting a poem or writing a letter to the editor. Go for it!

Next, the PR corrected a set of American literature papers in which the students, after reading *In Our Time* and excerpts from Hemingway's novels, were expected to comment about his writing style, a common theme in his works, or the portrayal of his male or female characters. This time the PR established specific evaluative criteria and assigned points to each paper. Note below the sample evaluative criteria used for this paper. Students were given copies of this half sheet and asked to staple it to the final copy of their paper when they turned it in.

Hemingway Paper—Evaluative Criteria

1. Opening is properly developed with a thesis statement clearly stated 1 2 3 4
2. The essay is well-organized around the chosen topic with an attempt to interest the reader 1 2 3 4 5
3. The writer has used specific references from the story/stories, given proper credit as needed, and supported his/her assertions sensibly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
4. Writer's VOICE is present to give a good “personal connection” 1 2 3 4 5

TOTAL POINTS (25 POSSIBLE) _____

COMMENTS: _____

In the next assignment I requested that the PR proofread papers “written for publication” as part of an essay contest (the topic was *family life*) sponsored by WCAL radio station in Northfield. When the papers were returned to the students, they were asked to rewrite their essays before sending them in to WCAL. To complete the work on this mini-grant project, the PR evaluated two other assignments: an analysis of a poem written by an African-American author (in the American literature classes) and a research paper written by my College Prep Writing students. The PR evaluated the poem papers for content, organization, and mechanics and assigned letter grades. And since we were on a tight time schedule in the College Prep Writing class, he simply proofread the research papers for surface errors and inserted marginal comments where necessary. When all the ink had dried on the pages, the PR had worked about 30 hours and provided some much needed help for this beleaguered English teacher.

Tentative Conclusions

Aside from the obvious lift such professional help can give to the classroom teacher—I’m not sure how much time the PR’s efforts saved me, but it was considerable—there are a number of other potential benefits one can derive from a program such as this:

1. It can “resurrect” the careers of recently-retired English teachers, giving them another opportunity (albeit on a much smaller scale) to employ their skills in serving young people. And of course the PR is spared the tasks associated with teaching five classes a day.

2. It can be a spirit booster for the PR. On at least two occasions the PR wrote, after correcting a set of papers, “I enjoyed the exercise and do look forward to my next assignment.”

3. Students receive valuable feedback from another professional, someone who may be able to provide a different perspective or give fresh advice about their writing. Students do receive peer feedback in my classes, but most of the time I have been their primary evaluator; so this new voice is welcome as a restoring rain after a long dry spell. The PR gives students another audience to write for.

4. If the PR has observed the initial classroom instruction for the writing assignments, he or she can share observations about the lesson with the English teacher. Given the right conditions and the right chemistry, this situation could develop into a collegial relationship as well, with the retired teacher (the PR) serving as an advisor or perhaps even as a “teaching of writing” mentor for the classroom teacher. Such an arrangement might especially benefit a first or second-year teacher.

5. The PR can give the classroom teacher constructive advice regarding the written directions for particular assignments and cite obvious problems students experienced in their writing.

6. The PR can assist the teacher in creating evaluative criteria for specific assignments.

Some Recommendations

Although I was not able to provide the PR with an opportunity to teach a writing lesson or to create a new assignment for the College Prep Writing class, this program was a great benefit to all parties involved (the students, the PR, and the classroom teacher). I encourage overburdened teachers of writing at any grade level to tap into this valuable local resource—the retired English teacher. If you are considering a program such as this, you may want to take note of these final recommendations derived from our experience at Northfield.

1. If your district does not have LEF’s or grant money available, set aside some department funds—meager as they may be—to initiate a PRP. Once you get it started, your principal may be persuaded to budget funds for it on a regular basis.

2. Apply for the grant in the spring so you can use summer writing time to complete the proposal and gear up for the fall semester.

3. Share the wealth. While it works well if the teacher and one PR work together as a team, this does not mean that other teachers should not be so favored. Encourage your colleagues in other departments (particularly those who require their students to write a great deal) to apply for grants as well and/or to work with you in planning and implementing the program. You might be able to secure more money if your grant proposal is interdisciplinary in nature.

4. Only as a last resort should you implore retired English teachers to “volunteer” their services for a program like this. Paying people for an important job gives it status, and it will of course make the PR grateful.

5. Make sure the PR understands the nature of and the guidelines for each writing assignment; this may mean having him/her observe your initial classroom explanations of the assignment, but it certainly means giving the PR copies of the assignment and any books or readings used as background for the paper. The best scenario is to have the PR observe your class and then sit down and discuss the assignment with you.

6. There should be an agreement between the classroom teacher and the PR that all critical comments will be of a constructive nature designed to encourage and compliment the student writer.

7. If the partnership consists of an inexperienced classroom teacher and the PR, the PR may want to teach some of the first semester writing assignments in order to provide teaching models for the inexperienced teacher.

8. When time permits, ask the PR to be present when papers are returned so students can get proper explanations and so the PR can set up conferences as necessary.

9. Make sure your principal knows what's going on. Keep him/her informed.

10. Write an article for the school or district newsletter, informing parents about your program.

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