



## **Introducing Joel Freedman and Deborah Lowe: Chief Nurturers of The UCLA Writing Project's Study Group on Homophobia**

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By Faye Peitzman

When it comes to conferences, there's always a "chief worrier." A very needed position— one person will do. Everyone else can just enjoy. But with a study group, we need nurturers. And that's a main key to the leadership successes of Joel Freedman and Deborah Lowe.

Joel and Deborah have guided the UCLA Writing Project's study group on homophobia, on-going since 2005. It's not common for study groups to thrive for quite so many years—two or three is more the norm, and then participants are pulled away by other life's demands, personal and professional alike. But Joel and Deborah have remained loyal to the study group's mission: to make schools safe and inclusive places for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. Clearly their leadership has played a major role not only in the study group's longevity, but also in its continued development and action.

As the study group's first convener, I am the carrier of its institutional history. Back in the early fall of 2005, 16 writing project fellows responded to the invitation to join a group dedicated to improving the school experiences of LGBT students. We met at one of the fellow's homes—and no one, except for me, knew anyone else in the room. That changed soon enough—and a good number of us continued to meet monthly during the academic year. We were a heterogeneous group, but like-minded regarding the necessity of breaking the silence around LGBT issues. We engaged in dialogue, asked questions, read, but even in that first year—we knew we wanted to take action.

By the third year, we began to pilot one-day lessons in high school classrooms. And by the fourth year—with both Joel and Deborah at the helm—the group was off and running: piloting curriculum units to break the silence around LGBT issues, leading workshops at local, state and national conferences, initiating a writing contest for high school students, and collaborating on the writing of a TIIP grant to further enhance the group's expertise.

Joel and Deborah are busy people these days—always were busy, but teaching life in the fast lane has gotten . . . faster. When I was able to corral them together on [freeconferencecall.com](http://freeconferencecall.com), I asked the questions only they could answer—regarding initial hopes, and what has been most gratifying, surprising, and dismaying in their study group participation and leadership.

**Faye:** Joel and Deborah, both of you were invited to participate in our LGBT study group—and also to co-direct—back in 2007. Why did you accept—and what were you hoping for?

**Deborah:** I was hoping for an opportunity to participate with others who were asking the same kind of questions about homophobia. It felt like a nice way to be involved with Center X—a group of smart teachers working on an issue dear to my heart. A group that was collaborating, really interested in both their own practice and a broader mission—on regional and national levels.

**Joel:** For me it was personal interest. I went through high school bewildered. I didn't want what happened to me to happen to other students. Not that I had a traumatic experience, but I had no idea who I was—and had no one to ask. The notion that I could help things be different now was a motivating force. And, of course, now, to a certain extent it seems things will be different. I'm talking about the FAIR Education Act. But who is going to make this new law work? Teachers don't know how to proceed.

**Faye:** Yes, the July 2011 act requires California schools to include contributions of LGBT people into the K-12 social studies curriculum. Do you want to say a little more about it?

**Joel:** Only that this law won't mean anything more than the publisher's additional profit from the sale of updated social studies books unless teachers do something. It'll be up to gay people—and allies—to see to it that something is done.

**Faye:** And perhaps our study group can play a role too.

**Faye:** So much has happened in our group these past four years. What has been most gratifying to you?

**Deborah:** Very early on—you, Joel and Norma (Mota-Altman) were scheduled to present at the National Writing Project's Urban Sites Conference in San Diego. Then Norma got sick—and you asked me to take her place. What a powerful experience! I had no idea what interaction with this broader pool of teachers would mean to me. There was a huge thirst and hunger for advice, help, collegiality to address homophobia in the classroom. We were able to reach out to teachers from so many different Writing Project sites—who were so passionate. Professionally eye opening—this contact with people you wouldn't meet otherwise.

**Joel:** I believe that I've benefitted by reentering the field over 20 years after I was first certified to teach. I don't know what I would have done. I don't know if I would have survived. I had always been out. How was I going to navigate unfriendly and unwelcome territory? Certainly not by becoming closeted. It's gratifying that we are even having these conversations and looking to make the adjustments in our classrooms to include and acknowledge our LGBT students. It's equally maddening to feel so under-evolved, sometimes having to couch the conversation around ideas, whether or not the need is there, for example, that I believe should be far behind us by now.

**Faye:** What has surprised you? Dismayed you?

**Deborah:** Our study group work with *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* comes to mind immediately. Who would imagine that this young adult book was going to take us to such interesting places? A nice surprise. And so many teachers have gone on to use it outside of our group. When I was teaching at Roosevelt [High School] we had several class sets—and they were in heavy rotation for a while.

My dismay isn't with the study group per se—but rather the current climate of teaching—decrease in funding, harder for teachers to be involved in activities like the study group—

another layer outside of school. This kind of step outside of teachers' main arena, so few can afford to do this.

**Joel:** I guess my dismay is connected with the financial picture too. We're hobbled by demands on teachers increasing with no offer of the necessary support to assure success. And politics are mandating that educators program students to be effective test-takers rather than teach students to be critical thinkers. In the national conferences, we did have a good number of teachers in our workshop audiences. But more recently the numbers have been fewer. Not as many attend when the focus is on LGBT. Bullying—that's more palatable. Talking around the issue. But that's not exactly what I signed up for.

**Faye:** Joel, and what about the gratifying part?

**Joel:** It's gratifying to see students love the activities we've created, to see them have an emotional and visceral engagement with issues that may concern them directly or second-hand through a friend or relative. Lots comes out. A conversation about whether or not to come out to parents. A revelation of an HIV-positive uncle. A connection made between like injustices that humanizes a gay kid's plight.

**Faye:** What else can you tell us about the rest of your teaching/professional life?

**Deborah:** A few years ago I co-wrote a proposal for a pilot school, huge undertaking. I've become lead teacher for my school, run professional development, support the instructional program, work with LAEP in teacher training for humanitas and other small schools projects.

**Joel:** When I was teaching at King/Drew, I was totally involved with my students, didn't really yield a leadership wand. Now at Fairfax, I've become concerned about the consideration our African-American students get. I'm already becoming involved. These are activism skills that the study group helps me keep honed. I'm still playing from the sidelines, but I'm persistent. Additionally, this work we do keeps us writing, and writing to be published. We're talking lately of going beyond the occasional article in an education publication and putting together a book.

**Faye:** Last words?

**Joel:** I don't think we are that extraordinary. I talk to great teachers all the time. I don't think that there are a whole bunch of teachers who went into the field to be ineffectual. We just have to keep working to get to them.

**Deborah:** Joining the study group and being invited to do conference presentations with you and Joel and Norma and then participating in the summer invitational—all of that has really been a big part of my preparation for my current Lead Teacher position at our pilot school. Specifically, it was a fabulous education in how teachers teaching teachers can be the most powerful form of professional growth. Our school's professional development model is built around that precept. Our teachers feel their expertise is respected, that their time is well spent, and that their learning is focused on needs they identify. I credit the Writing Project for helping me absorb this philosophy and assisting me in honing the skills I needed to put it into practice.

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