



Minnesota Writing Project

Fall 2002

Vol. 12 No. 1

Leaping from the Hammock

Last spring, when I told a teacher I used to teach with that I was returning to the Minnesota Writing Project Institute in July, she looked at me as if I had missed the point of summer, “You’re going back *again*?” she asked.

I convincingly explained the merits of participating in a writing group, glimpsing how other teachers teach writing, and presenting best practices to colleagues. “Sounds great,” she said with a skeptical eyebrow still cocked. Then, she explained her plans to write in her journal and read books about teaching writing while lying in her hammock and drinking lemonade, “I need to be alone to renew myself,” she said.

I scratched my head. How could I argue with a hammock and lemonade?

But when July came, I knew why I left my shady oak tree and hammock to gather with thirteen other participants—elementary through college teachers, including a teacher of English Language Learners, and a Media Specialist—in the Carlson School of Management’s frigid air-conditioned room. With shaky hands, we stood in front of each other, presenting slices of our writing classrooms and experiences. We exploded writing moments, performed multiple-voice poems, debated comma placement, created vivid settings, designed newspapers, and were constantly reminded that a second grader’s writing struggles are stunningly similar to the writing challenges faced by a high school student and by ourselves.

We strayed from business. In-between demonstrations, we celebrated birthdays with brownies and keylime pie. We patted Anna’s chocolate lab Nellie, named for word-traveling reporter Nellie Bly, as she roamed the aisles looking for friends and muffin crumbs. We traded treasured teaching resources and favorite beach books. We puzzled over old, broken Volvo car radios and commiserated over leaky basements and grueling renovation projects. We visited the Kerlan Collection, Weisman Art Museum, and Open Book. We were rejuvenated not only to discover new writing strategies for our classrooms and ourselves, but also to find others who care about good teaching and good writing as deeply as we do. What book and hammock can give you that?

Our writing projects began as individual endeavors, but inevitably, connected us to each other. During the Institute, I picked up a piece of writing that I had started months ago. Loosely based on an autobiographical seventh grade episode when I was straddling two groups of friends, the chapter was from a to-be middle grade novel that I have yet to write. After wrestling with my master’s thesis all spring, it was a pleasure to think about these quirky characters again.

But after a few hours of revisiting them, I was annoyed: “Why won’t my protagonist do what I want her to do?” “Why can’t I make her sound right?” “Should I seek professional help if I’m experiencing more middle school angst than my characters?”



By the time I got to the end, I considered the delete key. But I knew better than that. I had been alone too long in the trenches with a whole crowd of nervous middle schoolers who only existed on paper. I needed others. So, I handed the pages to my writing group, and somehow, it was a relief to let go of the writing. My group asked me questions: “Where was Lucas sitting in the classroom?” “Do you need the teacher in this chapter?” “Where will you go from here?” **(Continued on page 2.)**

Alone at my computer the day before, I was ready to call it quits. But collaborating with my group infused me with new inspiration. Their gentle tugging and probing questions opened up new possibilities, and ultimately sent me back to my computer to do the writing that I needed, and wanted so badly, to do.

As is the tradition, we celebrated our writing on the last day of the Institute by reading our work aloud. We sat around rectangular tables, comfortably crammed together in a small room in the Gateway Alumni Center. Though I had come to know my writing group's pieces and had heard snippets of nearly everyone's work, I was amazed. There were poems set to the blues, an essay mulling over when to start a family, a story revolving entirely around alliteration, a description of a violin lesson gone bad, a quilt poem about breaking free of orderly stitches. It was a celebration of our bold individual journeys to know the writing process deep down in the juicy center of our souls.

Yet as I watched each writing group take their turn to sit together in front of the room, it occurred to me that this was also a celebration of having leapt from our separate hammocks. Group members explained to the audience, "Do you know how far she has come with these poems?" "It was such an honor to write with him," and then they listened to each other read; nodding, laughing, and tearing up because they had witnessed the birth of that line, and they had been there to nurture it along the way.

It's true that we all need individual time to sway in solitude under the oaks in order to return to the sweaty work of teaching and writing. But when we leave our own backyards, if only for three weeks, to converge our research, teaching, and writing paths with others, we renew our selves in ways we never imagined.

When I listened, on this final day, to my colleagues read, some with shy-soft tones, and others bounding around with exuberant emotion, I felt a new sense of energy and confidence to return to my own teaching and writing. Somehow I knew these now familiar voices would stay with me and take me all kinds of places.

- Deb Kruse-Field, 2000 MWP Fellow



Association. While sharing slides of her pictures for *Scarecrow* and *Mud*, she explained the process of effectively connecting visual images with words. She also gave participants instruction and practice in creating their own illustrated book of verse.

The remainder of the Institute was held in the Carlson School of Management from July 8 through the 26th. The Fellows come from a wide range of schools including traditional K-12, a charter school and a community college. Their teaching assignments are equally diverse, including family and consumer sciences, media specialist and ELL. Visitors to the Institute included former fellow Mary Beth Blegen, 1996 National Teacher of the Year, and Micheal Thompson, CFL Language Arts Specialist.

This combination provided the opportunity for reaching one of MWP's goals: sharing a rich variety of writing instruction. Returning fellow Deb Kruse-Field began the teaching demonstrations. Since participating in the 2000 Select Institute, she has completed an MA in literacy education at the U of M.

All of the demonstrations were exemplary and allowed participants the opportunity to learn new ideas for the instruction of writing. Phil Martin from Minneapolis Community and Technical College demonstrated how to use pieces of scrap lumber as a visual and tactile aid for avoiding sentence errors. Marceille Myers came in a scarecrow costume to illustrate her lesson on listening for story ideas. Bare Books can be turned into full books of memories when the 6th grade students of Lu Curtis follow her series of inspiring prompts. Edie Stearns showed everyone why her Chanhassen students feel good about testing! Her positive attitude is contagious when lyrics of "MCA" are sung to the classic tune of the Village People's "YMCA".

Fellows will have two follow-up meetings. In October they will reunite to celebrate the printing of their anthology by attending a reception and reading at the Minnesota Humanities Center. Each Fellow has been asked to invite a colleague who is a potential participant in MWP. The second meeting involves a change in the Institute's research component. In an effort to make the action research more authentic, Fellows will convene this winter to summarize their research and to demonstrate how these findings have been used in their classrooms or have impacted their instruction.

These gatherings will serve as a means to continue the friendships and professional partnerships that make the Selective Institute a rewarding experience.

- Steve Smarjesse, 1997 MWP Fellow

Thirteenth Annual Selective Institute

Retreat: June 18-20, 2003

Institute: July 7-25, 2003

MWP is accepting nominations for next year's Institute. Application deadline: 1/31/03.

12th Annual Selective Institute: More Proof That Learning Can Be Fun

The 12th MWP Selective Institute was the same as the previous 11-- outstanding!

This year's session opened in June with a three-day retreat at the Mount Olivet Retreat Center in Farmington. In addition to activities planned for getting acquainted and warming up to the skill of personal writing, the featured guest was Lauren Stringer, illustrator of children's books, whose work has been recognized by the Society of Illustrators and the International Reading

NWP Writing Retreat

Frankly, I wasn't sure that I was up for an intensive writing retreat that came on the heels of the close of a school year. Nevertheless, on June 27 I was headed for Santa Fe, New Mexico, to participate in the Fourth Annual National Writing Project Writing Retreat.

Early last spring when I applied for one of the twenty-or-so spots available for the NWP Retreat, it was on a self-dare: I was daring myself to show my writing to other professionals from all over the country. Like any teacher with 30 years of experience in the classroom, I had accumulated zillions of anecdotes and probably hundreds of good lesson plans and a handful of epiphanies. From this storehouse I needed to find a timely topic that would survive the scrutiny of the editors and teachers gathered at Sunrise Springs Conference Center. Furthermore, I needed to feel passionate about the topic if I were to work up a draft good enough to send out for publication—one of the aims of this retreat. Not surprising to those who know me, the topic I chose was Resurrecting *A Tale of Two Cities* in the High School English Classroom. I worried about whether or not my topic was hip enough.

As it turns out, *everyone* had the same worries as I did. Our facilitators were Joe Check, Boston WP; Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, NWP of Acadiana; and Gwen Williams, Peachtree Urban WP. These three served as our editors, confessors, and cheerleaders.

By the end of the fourth day I no longer felt as if I were in unfamiliar territory. I had actually bared my rough draft to my writing group. I had laughed until I was sick. I had swapped "teacher stories" with the best of them. I had learned some new terms like "Webliography" and "transactional writing." I had found within me the guts to write passionately about the teaching of *A Tale of Two Cities*. And I have resolved to send out my final draft for publication somewhere—but not until my writing group has seen it one more time over e-mail, of course.

My advice to you, dear reader, is to watch for upcoming info about the Fifth Annual NWP Writing Retreat!

- Janet Johnson, 1996 MWP Fellow

NWP's ELL Network Writing Retreat

A quiet desert setting, gourmet meals, cozy accommodations, wonderful company and time to think and write—the dream became reality for 21 Fellows who participated in the first ELL Network Writing Retreat near Santa Fe, New Mexico July 4-7. Participants from many states came with a desire to write for publication and to address ELL issues. Facilitators Joe Check of Boston and Kathleen O'Shaughnessy of the NWP of Acadiana (Louisiana) provided writing assistance to participants. Fellows were a part of a writing group, spent large blocks of time writing and revising and finally celebrated by reading portions of their pieces which will be completed by January. Hopefully, you will find some of these articles in upcoming issues of *The Quarterly*. Not only was the writing inspiring, but the opportunity to network with colleagues from all over the country as well as taking in some sights provided a rich experience. Mary Ann Saurino and Bev Alsleben were Minnesota Writing Project fellows who attended. - Bev Alsleben, 2000 MWP Fellow



MWP Reunion: Celebrating Ourselves as Writers and Teachers of Writing

On September 14, approximately fifty teachers and MWP staff and friends gathered to celebrate twelve years of joining teachers in professional development and in reflective writing. Nearly all of the participants had attended one or more Selective Institute; some reflected on the Institute's serving as a milestone or catalyst for personal and professional change. The event was structured as a time for Institute participants to reunite and socialize (some had not seen Fellows from their Institute for up to ten years), to share teaching victories and strategies, and to reflect on their development as writers and teachers of writing.

Attendees chatted over coffee in the registration area, exchanging hugs and enthusiastic wishes to "catch up" on the lives of colleagues. The socializing transitioned into the series of break-out sessions, which were designed as an opportunity for participants to learn about successful teaching strategies and to discuss issues in an informal manner, without homework or other requirements. Topics ranged from revision strategies to creating an inquiry-based classroom to incorporating art into writing. Special guest Mary Anne Smith, Co-Director of the National Writing Project, facilitated a session on portfolios that included findings from *The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios*, which she co-edited.

Lunch followed, including introductions of all attendees, and culminated in a keynote speech by Mary Beth Blegen, 1991 MWP Fellow and 1996 National Teacher of the Year. She provided a moving narrative on how participating in the Selective Institute and teaching have changed her life, personally and professionally.

The last round of break-out sessions were well-attended, despite the lure of socializing after lunch, and included exploring new trends in adolescent books, understanding the transition from high school to college, and the kick-off of a new MWP activity—Literacy Groups.

- Erin Harley, MWP Research Assistant

Check out MWP's updated site at
<http://mwp.cla.umn.edu>

Learn how to join/start a Literacy Group!

See pictures from the 2002 Institutes
and the MWP Reunion!

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**THE MINNESOTA WRITING PROJECT
NEWSLETTER**

published quarterly by
The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
University of Minnesota
227 Lind Hall
207 Church St. S. E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
ISSN 1061-6535

An Official Site of the National Writing Project
also funded by the
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
and the College of Liberal Arts at the
University of Minnesota

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