



Minnesota Writing Project

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Selective Summer Institute: Writing for Ourselves, Students, Community

by *Kim Lindell*

After reflecting on what happened during our three-week Selective Summer Institute and restoring retreat, I continue to try to understand how the vision and mission of the Minnesota Writing Project manifests itself. What emerged from our work together this summer? How will it impact our own writing practice and what we do in our classrooms with student writers?

In my study of brain-based learning and systems theories, I learned about a computer simulation done by Craig Reynolds of the Symbolics Corporation in Los Angeles in the early 1990's. Essentially, he created a program that simulated a flock of birds (what he called "boids") by programming three simple rules for them. These rules of relationship enabled the "boids" to fly in a common direction and respond to their changing environment. Similarly, when a community of teachers organize around a few common beliefs and practices, they can powerfully impact a changing system of students, teachers, learning, and writing.

Thus, when I look back at our experience together this past summer, I realize that certain beliefs and practices emerged. And as a result of organizing around common beliefs and practices, we flew in a flock of successful writing and learning communities. We all either explicitly or implicitly seem to believe that everyone has a voice that deserves to be heard. Additionally, we have all experienced the way in which writing can serve as the means to hear that voice. And it's not the kind of writing injected by an authoritative teacher; it is the kind of writing process that emphasizes the learning that happens along the way in order for voices to speak and share.

Each day we teachers create and help to sustain the growth of writers' voices—we invigorate, inspire, validate, and encourage reflection and evaluation. We know the brain is social and seeks meaning; we know that threats discourage students' willingness to take risks, to invest themselves. By organizing our writing workshops around a community that respects, listens, learns together, and honors each community member's voice, we begin to understand how good writing happens. This is powerful stuff.

The first night of the retreat reminded me of this power. We experienced the risks and the strength of sharing our voice in a community of writers. We wrote about a significant object in our lives. Marsha showed us her personal collection. And we wrote. A group of educators, ninety minutes invested into our summer experience. And what emerged were incredibly honest introductions to one another, in a rich continuum of voices. Seems simple doesn't it? And yet, we know the art that goes into creating a community of writers. We know the vulnerabilities that go with exposing our words. We know the frustrations with ourselves, sometimes (continued)



2003 Selective Institute Attendees



MWP Fellow Kim Lindell ('98) kicks-off the 2003 Summer Institute Retreat.

Everyone has a voice that deserves to be heard.. writing can serve as the means to hear that voice.

(continued from page one) with group members, and certainly those we see with students working in groups. So what happened this summer that strengthened our faith in writing in a community? What happened with you and your own writing that you can bring to your classroom? Trust the transferability of your learning this summer. Trust how it can and will strengthen the writing communities in your classroom.

More than anything, I am reminded of the power of writing in the process of learning. I truly believe that writing reveals what we know and that our knowing in turn expands. We expanded our own practice of writing and teaching, cumulatively through the participation in our demonstration lessons. We wrote in different genres as a means to *think*, as a means to *learn*. We put our thought processes into words through metacognitive writing about *how* we learned something (how I did that mysterious math problem in my head - how I can demystify it by putting it into writing.) We brought characters to life through press conferences and monologue writing (interviewing skills, congruent postulations, synthesizing and extrapolating). We played with writing as a tool to see how a thought expands by making analogies between musicians' similar and different themes. We thought and wrote in steps that help reveal relationships between modern art and perceptions of culture.

All in all, the MWP selective institute has emerged as a writing community that practices the art of refining our voices by writing both in community and alone. Writing is the common denominator that empowers our students to think and articulate their own voices. Through modeling, practice, and nourishing of the writing process, students will have the skills to demystify their own writing. Through a writing community, they will find the strength to voice their own learning and to help others give voice to theirs. Just like we did. Thanks. I have been fortunate to write with all of you this summer. You are a group of professionals, intelligent and mindful about your craft of teaching writing.



MWP Advisory Board gathers around Linus with MWP TC exchange Oreather Bostick-Morgan.

A Look Back at MWP's Summer Activities

This past summer was certainly unique. Several 2003 Selective Summer Institute teachers who had previously taught outside of the US brought such richness to the institute experience. In addition, we were honored to have one of the directors of the Peachtree Writing Project (Atlanta, Georgia) with us for two weeks. Being selected to participate in the National Writing Project Teacher Exchange Program, our site was privileged to have Oreather Bostick-Morgan join us. She was the 2001-2002 Teacher of the Year for Slater Elementary School and a 2002-2003 semi-finalist for Georgia Teacher of the Year. In addition to her passionate, energetic, warm Southern presence, she enlightened us with one of her demonstrations and created a fantastic powerpoint program about her time in Minnesota. (See it at mwp.cla.umn.edu) As part of this MWP program, our site sent one of our teacher consultants, Melissa Borgman (2000), to spend two weeks with the Indiana Writing Project at Ball State University in a similarly enriching experience. Consequently, our site not only profited from ideas from the Peachtree WP, but also from the Indiana WP. Melissa strongly encouraged us to participate again. Being involved with MWP/NWP offers teachers so many ways to grow personally and professionally.

"The first step is to take risks. Before I even picked up a pen, I had to look the people in my writing group straight in the eyes. Could a savvy grad student from a lofty, mysterious place called the Writing Center forgive my ignorance? Would the 19 year-old boy snigger when he read the poem about my mother? It was like hanging my laundry out to dry where everybody could see it flapping in the breeze. I held my breath and wrote it anyway..."

read more of Jessica Breed at mwp.cla.umn.edu



See inserts:

- *membership renewal form
- *upcoming grammar workshop flyer

Good-bye from Lillian Bridwell-Bowles

As I move on...

We all like to think that our work matters in the world, and with the Minnesota Writing Project, I could always see that it did. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim describes the ways we (and children) construct our lives through narratives, and I had the pleasure of doing exactly that on a conscious level with so many of you through the reading we did, but most especially through the writing we produced. We always learned as we wrote. When we wrote about painful or difficult events, we processed important memories, sometimes framing them in new ways to give ourselves new options, sometimes creating fantasies about what might have been or what could be. When we wrote about favorite teachers or students, we reinforced each other's better moments, sometimes embellishing for the sake of humor. And we all need more fantasy, more validation, more humor!

My favorite piece of my own writing, "Master's Tools" (in *Narration as Knowledge*), was an essay about my formative years growing up in Florida and beginning to teach just as schools were being desegregated. The idea for it was born in an MWP summer institute, and the text itself was produced the following summer, with generous help from my writing group. I learned a great deal about myself and about my students from exploring the racism around us and within me, and I think that the act of writing this memoir helped me to grow as a teacher. I also think that it mattered to readers who have shared reactions to it with me. This piece of writing and the learning that came from it would never have happened without the support of teachers who love what they do, see the significance of their work, and are brave



MWP Co-Director Lillian Bridwell-Bowles will be leaving MWP to accept a position at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

"It was a crisp, cool fall day... My class was purring like contented kittens. I was a proud mother cat watching her brood. I drifted in this wonderful state when in came two upstarts: the jazzy young cats, otherwise known as practicum students. They said... "We may move to another classroom to observe and work. You know it's our literacy block this semester, and since you don't do literacy..." Inside my head all I heard was a scream. WHAT? I don't do literacy! How dare you!"

read more of Joanne Toft at
mwp.cla.umn.edu

enough to interrogate their failures alongside their successes. Judging from the anthologies we have produced, my experience was typical. We all need to spend more quality time with people who understand us, and the institutes gave us this time every summer.

Another great lesson that was reinforced for me by the MWP was the value of collaboration. Every year that I participated I carted away bags full of useful ideas, readings, booklists, anecdotes, etc. And that was the point. We came

together out of mutual respect for each other's ideas, and we multiplied the things we could cover. I would like to thank every one of my collaborators and colleagues in the MWP, but the list would take up all the space in this newsletter, and I might leave someone out, so I'll simply say thank you to one person: Muriel Thompson. For over 20

years we have supported each other personally and professionally—mostly seeing eye-to-eye, disagreeing occasionally and working through our differences, discussing teaching strategies, organizing MWP projects, plotting ways to reform education in Minnesota (and the world—we were rarely modest in our ambitions), grieving over the loss of friends and family members, sharing news of children and grandchildren, and through it all respecting each other. My hope for all of you is that you have found a colleague like Muriel in the MWP.

Our work does matter in the world, and the MWP is the best mirror I've had to allow me see this. It's quite simply the best professional experience I've ever had, and I thank you all for it.



Summer Institute teachers work on projects related to the Writing in the Visual Arts Workshop, held at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota. (left) Alison McGhee, local author and guest presenter at this year's retreat, inspires and teaches. (right)



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