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)
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.

(continued from page one)
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 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.

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

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)