



Minnesota Writing Project

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MWP Summer Institute: A Writer's Perspective

by Alex Mueller

"They cannot see me naked . . ."

These words, sung by Michael Stipe of R.E.M. in a nostalgic cry for the exhilaration of youthful transgression, aptly characterize my fear about sharing my writing. It's not as if I haven't done it before, but the vulnerable feeling of nakedness that accompanies the act of sharing is always there. Only in situations like the MWP Summer Institute do I begin to feel at ease. That's because, there, we are all naked. Some are tastefully nude, a bit more artful and seasoned than the rest of us, but we all nevertheless must disrobe, revealing things we are proud of alongside things we are ashamed of – even those pesky dangling prepositions.

This year, I attended my second consecutive summer institute, an experience that made me realize how structure, as hard as it may try, never governs content. Even though we participated in the same tried-and-true institute offerings (personal writing, teaching demonstrations, classroom research), every day felt fresh and just as enlightening as it did the previous summer. Most of all, I was floored by the sheer honesty of this particular group. One Friday, after a long week of intensive writing and collaborative teacher work, I decided to read the children's book *On the Day You Were Born* by Debra



Melissa Castino Reid shares work with fellow writers Dawn Harrison & Jennifer Waller McDevitt.

Frasier as a writing prompt, thinking that such a touching meditation might inspire some hopeful words or happy remembrances. Instead, my colleagues' responses expressed sadness, frustration, and anger



2005 MWP Summer Institute Participants

at what one of them called a "pleasant fiction." This institute was not always comprised of back-slapping and optimism about the future of educating our youth. It was often a time to confront painful realities, not only about our classrooms, but also about ourselves.

Keeping with tradition, the institute began with a retreat to inspire and build trust between participants. One retreat highlight was a visit from Isabell Monk O'Connor. The Twin Cities actress, who most recently gained praise for her role as Jocasta in the Guthrie's production of *Oedipus*, enraptured participants with her phenomenal storytelling.

Once the institute proper began, it was clear that participants were ready to write, read, and share. Write we did—everything from poetry inspired by snack food to prose based on characters randomly selected from buckets. By the end of the institute, we had accumulated a sizeable pile of writings from which we could choose pieces to share and/or publish in the annual MWP anthology.

The celebration day was truly a moment of greatness for all of us to revel in our collective nakedness and trust. One participant reflected, "I had never given myself permission to write, and when I did for this institute, the flood gates were opened and my work was received in constructive and supportive ways." By creating safe spaces, the institute encouraged innovative risk-taking that made us all, even if for a brief moment, feel like world-beaters. I'm convinced that every teacher needs to feel this way, at least once.

Twin Cities Teens Bring Poetry to the Mic

by Melissa Borgmann

When poet Paul Flores flew in from the Bay Area last fall to invite a small group of Minnesota teachers and artists to get a Teen Spoken Word team together and bring them to the Brave New Voices™ International Youth Poetry Slam in April, I had no idea how much my life was about to change.

Nine months after that fateful October meeting at Hamline University, I no longer teach at North High. Instead, I hold weekly spoken word and production meetings at the Loft Literary Center for local urban youth who are on fire about this art form. Not only did we qualify five Twin Cities' teen poets (and one from Iowa) for the Brave New Voices™ Festival, but we took 24 others out to San Francisco to experience the most amazing, inspiring international performance event. Since returning, the program has only grown. On average, our youth are getting two to three calls per week to come and perform at school celebrations, art space openings, and other community events.



Urban youth get fired up about poetry with Teens Rock the Mic.

Given the incredible success of the group our youth call Teens Rock the Mic, my teaching arts partner, Dudley Voigt, and I are joining forces with the Minnesota Spoken Word Association to form a local chapter of the Youth Speaks organization. This is a national committee of nonprofit organizations, poets, and educators dedicated to supporting the next generation of leaders through the written and spoken word. Locally, our teen poets and producers have come up with their own vision of what Teens Rock the Mic is all about: "The mission of this program is to impact society by

giving voice to those without — through story, experience and the art of spoken word. As young activists and artists, we want to raise awareness, promote social justice and uplift the community, the nation and the world."

To learn more about Teens Rock the Mic, receive information on upcoming events, or book the group for a performance, check out www.junocollective.org.

Thursday, October 20

9:00 - 1:00 ~ Lind Hall 306b ~ U of M

HANDS-ON TECH TOOLS: PODCASTING

Showcase student writing on the air! Learn how your students can create their own radio show using minimal hardware and free software, then archive and play shows through your school's website.

To register, e-mail Muriel Thompson (murielt@umn.edu) or call 612-625-6323.

For complete event information, go to <http://mwp.cla.umn.edu>.

Did You Know? You can also receive this newsletter over our listserv. If interested, please contact Alex Mueller (muel0274@umn.edu).

MINNESOTA WRITING PROJECT ANNUAL

Since MWP thrives through the voices and involvement of experienced educators, we value your support! **To renew your membership, fill out the enclosed form & mail it to MWP:**

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MWP MEMBERSHIP HAS GREAT BENEFITS!

- receipt of our newsletter
- \$5 discounts on workshops
- invitations to all MWP & related events
- an electronic support network, listserv, & website
- opportunity to participate as a Teacher Consultant

Adventures, Surprises Abound while Teaching in Istanbul

by Ann Mershon

Talk about adventures! I've always wanted to teach overseas, and here I am in Istanbul, Turkey. Go figure!

A few years ago, Bob and Patty Strandquist gave a presentation on international teaching at an MCTE Conference. They had taught in both England and Norway. I took meticulous notes, hoping to follow their lead. I checked out the University of Northern Iowa website and posted my resume.

Enter John Chandler, an efficient and distinguished administrator. Mr. Chandler e-mailed me about an English position at the Koç School (pronounced "coach") near Istanbul. I checked out the school online and was impressed by the facility and the compensation package (great pay, free housing, free medical and dental, etc...). I was flattered by Chandler's timely, regular communications, but I wasn't sure I wanted to live in a country that bordered Iraq.

I attended the International Recruiting Fair at the University of Northern Iowa in early February with an open mind. In addition to an interview with Koç, I interviewed with a school in London, one in Warsaw, and another in Mexico. I had other interviews scheduled, but two of those positions were filled before my interviews, and I canceled out on Columbia -- too scary.

Between interviews, I chatted with numerous teachers at the conference. I was surprised to learn that nearly half of them were "regulars" on the international circuit seeking a change of scene (the average stay at an international school is two to four years). The general response from those teachers was that a position in Istanbul is a real prize. It's a phenomenally beautiful city punctuated by brilliant palaces, mosques and minarets -- a gateway between the Western and the Eastern Worlds. They raved about the exuberant warmth of the Turkish people and the incredible beauty of the country. Every person I spoke with encouraged me to consider Istanbul over my other options. I was surprised, but I listened. I was even more intrigued with the Koç School after their multimedia presentation. Located on a 200-acre campus outside the city, the school boasts state-of-the-art facilities, a huge glass pyramid commons area, and enviable cultural and service programs. My interview with Koç administrators was by far the most interesting and professional of my interviews.

After I'd received a number of offers, I called my friend Luana Brandt, a former social studies teacher and inveterate world traveler. I asked her to help me process the pros and cons of my options, and her response was, "Istanbul. No contest." With her enthusiastic recommendation and that of numerous international teachers, how could I choose anything but Koç? After I made the decision, world travelers commended me on my choice. A friend who worked with Norwegian Cruise Lines called Istanbul the most fascinating city in the world. A former student said Turkey was his favorite spot on an around-the-world college semester cruise. And the list goes on. Now that I've been here nearly a month, I have to say they were right. Turkey is fascinating, and the people are wonderful. I look forward eagerly to my first day with students, and I have to admit, too, that instead of five classes with 150 students, I have three classes with a total of 72 students. As I said before, go figure!

Ann Mershon is an English teacher from Grand Marais who participated in the 1999 and 2004 MWP Summer Selective Institutes. If you'd like to receive regular reports on her experiences in Turkey, send an e-mail to amershon@boreal.org.



Ann Mershon considered several overseas teaching posts before heading to the Koç School in Turkey.

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MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS WILL ENTER YOUR NAME IN A SPECIAL MWP DRAWING.

THIS YEAR'S PRIZES AREN'T FINAL YET, BUT HERE'S A LIST OF LAST YEAR'S GREAT PRIZES:

- 1st prize - membership to the Loft Literary Center, which includes a subscription to *Speakeasy*, rental access to their Writers' Studios, & discounts on workshops, classes, & events.
- 2nd prize - \$50 gift certificate from Bound to be Read
- 3rd prize - Gift certificate from The Red Balloon Bookstore
- 4th prize - Subscription to NWP's *The Quarterly* and *The Voice*

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