



Minnesota Writing Project

Fall 2006

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Spreading the Good News: Two Summer Institute Reflections

by Joyce Malwitz

It was a glorious summer day, the kind of day that Minnesotans tuck away to savor in January when it seems the thermometer will never again register above 0. The kind of day teachers crave when half their students sneeze on them as, one-by-flu-ridden-one, they traipse by on the way to the Kleenex box at the front of the classroom. The kind of day that made me wonder what I had gotten myself into when I registered for the Minnesota Writing Project's Summer Institute. Looking back, I can confidently say that the Summer Institute provided everything I had hoped for—a focused and nourishing atmosphere for writing, a forum for exchanging ideas with a smart group of teachers, and lots of fun.

Fun is a relative term, I know. What's fun for English teachers may be absolutely frightening to the general population. Jokes about Proust? One-liners about Chekov? Maybe not. But we laughed a lot at Mount Olivet as the twenty-plus participants explored the outer limits of their writing talent and got to know each other. The camaraderie we developed during our weekend retreat was essential to the success of our class and laid the ground work for a supportive environment in which to write when we reconvened on the University of Minnesota campus in July.

While our writing groups became the heart of the Summer Institute (Kendrick, Phil, and Christine—I miss our working lunches at Erberts and Gerberts!), Jennifer Budenski's daily writing prompts provided the backbone. Challenging, gut-wrenching, and mind-boggling, Jennifer's prompts and the ensuing 15-20 minutes of uninterrupted writing time forced us to explore ideas and genres outside our comfort zone. Some mornings, I dove into the writing prompt—Jennifer must have surely been thinking of me when she developed it; other days, I froze—Jennifer must have surely been thinking of ways torture me when she developed it.

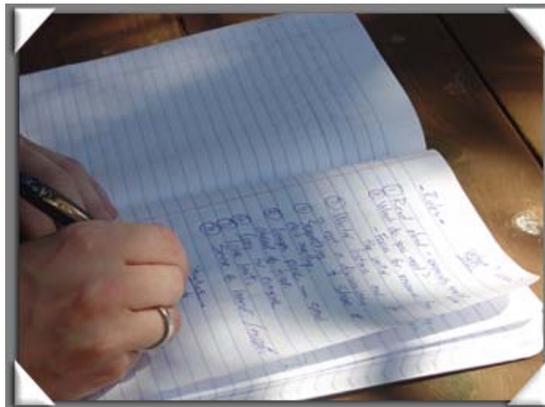
by Jennifer Budenski

The first week in June, the reality struck. I had agreed to repeat the summer institute. Two months earlier, in a fit of nostalgia, I had told Muriel, "Yes, I would love to!" remembering how I had begun my school year supplied with a notebook full of fresh ideas and a healthy feeling of renewal.

However, during that first week of June as summertime and garden beckoned, I also recalled the hours of reading, the writing, the demo preparation, and how I would miss the month of July with my children.

But I had agreed. Despite my crabbiness, I prepared muttering to myself that this group couldn't possibly be as special as my 2005 cohort. *We bonded.* And we were brilliant.

As I presented our opening writing prompt on the first day of the 2006 retreat, I felt as apprehensive as I do on the first day of school, an introvert among a bunch of strangers. Just like on the first day of school, as each person shared from his or her journal, we built a relationship. After having participated in such groups for two years, I realize that writing



A retreat participant responds to a writing prompt. For more photos, visit <http://mwp.cla.umn.edu/retreat/2006>.

groups work. The process may be more important than the membership.

This fall, I felt more reflective. I appreciated the opportunity to see into other teachers' classrooms, particularly elementary ones. I meditated on how my classroom fit into the K-12 scope and sequence of literacy education. This expanded vision has motivated me to continue to research literacy issues, and armed with two summers of best practices I've been far more confident in conversations with members of my district-wide language arts department: sending e-mails in response to meetings and presentations, sharing articles, and working hard to place literacy issues in a larger context for my colleagues.

To be honest, I've become positively evangelical about MWP. What if it just keeps getting better every year?

Book Reviews from Summer Institute Participants

Gallagher, Kelly. *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4-12*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2004. ISBN# 1571103848.

Deeper Reading gives practical advice for teaching reading and provides a plethora of adaptable activities. Kelly Gallagher delineates the reading process using examples of real literature. He encourages discussion about reading, including what good readers do and why reading is important. Gallagher emphasizes the difference between teaching reading and assigning reading and encourages modeling by teachers. The activities in the book are practical, easily adaptable, and meet the needs of all learning types. The text is broken into sections (First Draft Reading, Second Draft Reading, Using Metaphor, and Collaboration to name a few) which include activities that work well for each of the specific areas.

Katie Burke
Burnsville High School

Tanya Miller
Park Rapids Area High School

Elizabeth Hillstrom
Edina High School

Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6-12*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003. ISBN# 0-86709-519-9.

With NCLB constantly looming, school budgets being cut and cut again, and class sizes going up, teachers are constantly being asked to do more with less. At the same time, the number of students with serious academic gaps and deficiencies seems to be increasing. In *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*, Kylene Beers addresses specific academic interventions. The book is not a curriculum endorsement. It's not a textbook. It is an intervention manual. Beers writes from experience; both the experience of teaching struggling readers and the experience of being an overwhelmed teacher without time to read educational texts cover to cover. *When Kids Can't Read* is organized as a quick reference, listed by possible areas of difficulty with which chapter to turn to for ideas to use in the classroom. Beers's ideas are well planned, easily implemented and specifically targeted to students' needs. She has interventions for problems with comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, fluency, spelling, responding to literature and finding books that interest students. Additionally, the book's appendices could perform as a stand alone text, containing reproducibles, book lists—and more importantly—lists and explanations of grammar and spelling rules that every teacher should know, but many of us have forgotten. The content of Beers's book is worth its weight in gold, but its biggest selling point is its accessibility for use as a quick reference. Without any grade inflation, this book is a five out of five stars.

Erica Schatzlein
Battle Creek Elementary School

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension*. New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 2002. ISBN# 0-439-21857-8.

Action Strategies is a practical guide in using enactments for elementary through high school students. The text has an adequate amount of theory to give research-based support for using enactments in the classroom in order to deepen comprehension.



Throughout the book Wilhelm stresses scaffold learning and modeling. For example, it is important to ease into role-playing by first imagining the situation, student imagining that he/she possesses expertise and finally, taking on roles of people. Feeling safe in the classroom is critical, so experimenting with enactments as a group is suggested, building in the safety factor.

When reading *Action Strategies*, I struggled with the number of ideas for enactments. Halfway through I became overwhelmed by Wilhelm. At times it was difficult to visualize how an enactment might work and with what grade level because there were so many lists of ideas in every chapter! It is a book I will revisit and use as a resource in my classroom. Enactments will be a part of my curriculum.

Vicky Hubert
Faribault Middle School

Stead, Tony. *Reality Checks: Teaching Reading Comprehension with Nonfiction K-5*. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2005. ISBN# 978-157110-364-2.

I found *Reality Checks* by Tony Stead very practical and easy to read. Stead breaks down comprehension into three understandings: literal, interpretive, and evaluative. Under these three understandings he discusses the different skills students need to have for understanding non-fiction texts.



Stead follows a fifth grade and first grade teacher throughout the bulk of the book. Through careful modeling and lessons the students pick up on many different strategies for reading non-fiction. Stead captures the joys of classroom teaching with detailed descriptions of the planned lessons.

One of my favorite sections discusses the art of persuasion and the need for students to critically analyze non-fiction texts. I find this skill ever more important as media and the Internet get larger and more influential.

Stead demonstrates his extensive knowledge of quality non-fiction texts for classrooms by providing book lists appropriate for the some of the skills being taught.

I would recommend this book to elementary teachers who are looking to use more non-fiction texts effectively in their classrooms.

Phil Sheridan
New Spirit School



In a photo by Mershon, a Turkish guard interacts with a curious cat.

What to Fear?

Ann Marie Mershon has been teaching in Turkey, an experience which inspired her to write the following meditation:

Things To Be Afraid Of: bees, snakes, lightning, deep ravines, nightmares, and the Dark (OOOHHHH!!!). . .

Things Not To Be Afraid Of: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Caucasians, Asians, Arabs, Africans, or any other group of people. . .

I have a number of friends who have expressed anxiety about traveling to visit me in Turkey. They don't realize that the Turkish people are the kindest, warmest, most helpful people I've met. (Incidentally, they're Muslims.) But—let's take a look at safety statistics. The United Nations posts crime stats online, allowing for comparison between the U.S. and Turkey. Since the U.S. hasn't reported their crime statistics lately, I had to go back to 1999.

In 1999 Turkey had 247 police personnel per 100,000 people, while the U.S. had 243. Pretty comparable, but that's where the similarities end. Turkey reported a grand total of 476 crimes per 100,000 people, while the U.S. had 8,500—nearly 18 times the crime rate of Turkey. Hmm... Turkey reported 83 assaults per 100,000 people while the U.S.'s 805 is eight times as many. Turkey's 5 drug offenses per 100,000 people was dwarfed by the 560 reported by the U.S. (112 times as many).

Let's see...which country is safer?

According to travel writer Tom Brosnahan, who hosts a Turkey tourism web site (www.turkeytravelplanner.com), your chance of dying in a car accident anywhere in the world (one in 19,000) is FAR greater than your chance of dying in an airplane crash (one in 8,450,000) or a terrorist attack (one in 9,270,000). To simplify, your greatest risk in a trip to Turkey is the drive to and from the airport. Your chances of being killed by Avian flu are about one in 52,000,000 (totally negligible), and they're about zero if you don't handle sick or dead birds. Not to worry.

I hate to admit (since I seem to be defending Turkey) that Turkish drivers are incredibly aggressive, and statistics show that the chance of dying on the highway here is eight times greater than your risk in the States.

In spite of the bird flu and the terrorists and the (gasp) Muslims, it's the Cars we need to fear. So, add Cars to your list of things to fear—and give another thought to visiting Turkey.

Teaching Consultant News

Congratulations to **Melissa Borgmann** and the Juno Collective! Their "Teens Rock the Mic" Program is 1 of the 12 arts programs selected by Harvard Project Zero from 121 that applied nationally to be part of the case study, *Qualities of Quality: Excellence in Arts Education and How to Achieve It*, funded by The Wallace Foundation.

Ann Lindsey was accepted into the teacher exchange program, run by Hamline University and the U.S. Dept. of Education. She will be traveling to India and/or Bangladesh from January 20th-Feb 3rd, 2007. Good luck Ann!

This past summer **John Albright** participated in NWP Professional Writing Retreat A. Inspired by working and writing with other educators from around the country, he and **Jennifer Budenski** enthusiastically submitted a proposal and secured an NWP mini-grant to offer such an experience to our TCs. The MWP Professional Writing Retreat will take place overnight on a weekend in February. This retreat will largely serve to foster the pre-writing and early writing processes of teachers who are fairly new to "professional writing." During follow-up sessions participants will workshop drafts and present final work. Participants will then independently pursue publication for their own work. An e-anthology will be created from those participants who voluntarily submit their work. Look for upcoming information about this exciting new program!

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