

Minnesota Writing Project

Fall 2008

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Writing Therapy

by Lindsey Anderson

Writers, when you go home today, bring your notebooks with you. Also bring along your writer's eyes. Notice the world like a writer does. Find the extraordinary in the ordinary. I fed my students these lines day after day in my Writer's Workshop. Lucy Calkins said it. Ralph Fletcher said it. Georgia Heard said it. I read it. I said it. That's all I had to do to be a good teacher of writing...right? Right?

My writerly life, the one I preached to my students about, was a non-existent one. As a teacher of writing, I read about writing. Instead of "noticing the world around me" I stumbled to find a second to notice anything outside of my "school world." In moments of inconsistent inspiration, I would briefly jot down a story in my own writer's notebook. Inevitably, during these brief moments, a familiar feeling would consume me. I would feel it at first behind me—tapping on my shoulder, whispering in my ear. Then it would invade my senses and take over. Guilt. Guilt for what I wasn't planning. Guilt for doing something for myself. Guilt for not using my time for my students. And that guilt would force my pen down away from my notebook and move it back to my lesson planner. I knew I needed more time to write, but guilt kept my writing life at bay.

"So what did I do to relieve myself of my writer's guilt? I attended writer's therapy: The Minnesota Writing Project."

-Lindsey Anderson

MWP's 18th Annual Summer Invitational Institute Reflections

MWP Summer Reflections: Beyond Blue Horizons

by Susan Perala-Dewey

In my August patch of thick bog, surrounded by tamarack, spruce, and leather leaf, I search tirelessly for the best blueberry bush. A plant that yields plump, juicy berries; one that has been nurtured well by sunlight and acid soil; one that stands tall with lush healthy leaves and dangling clumps of blue pearls that pop, pop, pop into my bucket on demand. I know these bushes are most difficult to find, hidden so well beneath scratchy stiff spruce and jack pine I have to literally put my head into the small tree branches to carefully milk berries into my bucket. When I finally leave the patch, my hands are scratched and swollen, and my ankles, knees, and back have been put through the paces. Yet my fingertips are stained a deep permeating beautiful shade of purple, a blueprint for success remaining long after my berries are cleaned and stored.



Summer Institute participants

The writing project has reminded me of the toil and struggle we face as educators and, yes, activists, to nurture our students' reading and writing lives. It has reaffirmed that we must continue to cultivate every students' individual potential in a warm, trusting, caring environment, especially in the climate of an ever-demanding testing environment. When we

first met at the Retreat, I felt like a kid in school again, sur-

So what did I do to relieve myself of my writer's guilt? I attended writer's therapy: The Minnesota Writing Project. Along with twenty other teachers, I found myself asking tough questions: Where to find the time? What gives when we take time to write? How do we do both? Teach and write? It wasn't easy. In fact, it was often painful to experience the effects of withdrawal from being just a teacher to being a writer, but I needed something to sober me up from my teaching hangover.

In group therapy, we talked and wrote through our worries. And what did we learn? A few important things:

There is never enough time for anything. Never enough time to see everyone we want. Never enough time to plan or grade everything. Never enough time to sleep, to exercise, or to talk with friends. But at some point, we need to do it anyway. An old and much over-used cliché sadly can ring true for teachers when we don't take enough time to nurture the parts of us which are important—those who cannot do, teach. What a disservice we do to our students if we allow this to happen. We as teachers need to experience for ourselves what we ask our students to do. We need to take time for ourselves so we have our own stories.

As I reflect on my own past lessons, a funny thing always happened the day after I took some time to write for myself the night before. My Writer's Workshop would exceed my expectations. Our conversations about "what writers do" could reach beyond studying what Judy Blume or Sandra Cisneros had done. Instead we could talk as writers about what writers do and we could talk about it because we were doing it ourselves—even me. Furthermore, I could actually show them.



2 Lindsey Anderson

rounded by strangers, all of whom I knew were excellent teachers. I felt that awful "who's in and who's out", competitive feeling, so naturally a part of tra-



Susan Perala-Dewey, Chong Thao, Jodi Anderson, and Pamela Doerr enjoying campus.

ditional education. Yet, as the retreat progressed, I felt more comfortable -- ready to write, to read, to share, and to take risks -- the very things we want our students doing in the classroom. By the time our three-week institute began, we were committed and ready to learn from one another. The writing project also confirmed how the most vital learning takes place among and between people, not from texts and curriculum. I learned so much from the many interesting teachers I worked with throughout the institute. Each day we wrote together, listened to one another, and shared our best teaching strategies. There were so many great ideas presented I will put to work in my own classroom this fall. I plan to start out the semester using Paul's ideas for creating a community of caring writers, and I have been re-assessing my own grading and assessment criteria based on Patty's suggestions. The writing project model also reaffirmed my role as coach and participant in the classroom, a fellow writer and reader, taking risks alongside my students. Through our daily writing prompts and sharing, I was reminded over and over again how and why we must make ourselves a central part of the classroom to participate in the ever-evolving process to communicate our life experiences. But I was also reminded of how difficult it can be to bring our heartfelt beliefs on education into the classroom.

"Through our daily writing prompts and sharing, I was reminded over and over again how and why we must make ourselves a central part of the classroom to participate in the ever-evolving process to communicate our life experiences."

- Susan Perala-Dewey

Anderson, continued from page 2

frustrating, yet fulfilling thing we call writing. And it worked. It opened doors with them. Helped them to tell me where they were excited and where they were stuck. We talked together on those days as writers instead of “expert” and “student.”

And even though all this happened the days I wrote, guilt still reared its ugly head every time I put my pen to paper. The Minnesota Writing Project helped me to put my guilt to rest. Through talk with other dedicated teachers and writers, I discovered the importance of doing in order to show. We shared as teachers not only our own strategies to help unlock writing for our students, but how to also unlock writing for ourselves. We, together, began to live writerly lives. We wrote. We talked. We wrote. We analyzed. We wrote. We listened. And we found ourselves as teachers and as people a bit more. We did what we ask our students to do daily.

So will I still feel guilty for taking time to write? Most likely. But just as I tell my students to “write around the hard parts” I also need to write around the guilt. I cannot, after all, teach without doing myself.

So what did I get out of the Minnesota Writing Project? Simple. I became a writer.

Undercurrents

by Bob Burton

I rest on a rock
like shining algae,
dipping my foreign toes
in the ambling creek,
eavesdropping—
the spy Nature has grown to know.

Blurred by bold spotlights
reflecting off the ripples,
I listen to the creek’s chattering,

an echo of birdsong
with no response from rocks

who sit as silent strangers
with moon-blank faces,
wrinkled from stillness,
strong in their stances
guiding the creek flow.

This conversation—
aglow in strange whispers
and repeating
like advice
—is elusive.

Perala-Dewey, continued from page 2

As my writing group discussed repeatedly, “Why must we be saboteurs to carry out our mission as educators?”

While none of us can adequately address such big questions, we can work to support one another to bring fairness, justice, and human dignity into our classrooms. Some of us will be lucky enough to return this fall to a place well-supported by sunlight and moisture, while others will face harsh growing environments. We may be stuck on a nutrient-barren hillside under a tall red pine or in a damp shaded spruce forest, reaching out for sunlight. But no matter where we stand today in our teaching lives, we are stronger to have found each other. The writing project has created a cadre of sunlight, nutrients, moisture, and nitrogen enough to help us better the lives of our students. We are – “brothers and sisters in arms” – at the ready to support, guide, and bear witness to and for one another in order to give our students voice and authority in their world.



Writing at the retreat

MWP Ride

by Patty Sullivan

This poem is a version of a found poem. Everything in bold was observed and written down while I was on my daily journey to get to the Summer Institute.

Initial Value

Uncertain

But newspaper calls:

Put VARIETY in your life!

Consult the trip planner

Route 477

On time

Always

Limited Service

No stopping

It's your call

Decision made

Join the queue

Passengers lined up

With only a job before them

Flats happen

Nobody walks!

Hop On

Pay now

Sit back

Let the rhythm change

Listen:

Horns honk

Always a sound removed

A lullaby is sung

Of shifting seats

And unconsciously released sighs

Slumber calls

A sudden shift in the ride

NOTICE!

Pull to signal

Stop requested

Locate your nearest exit

Transfer

Detour

Detour

Rough road ahead

Sidewalk closed

Routes change

You are now

*In a **Community of Conversations***

Driven to discover

And your journey ends

*With **Stored Value***



Participants work in Center for Writing computer lab.

The Summer Institute: a time to play with new technologies



Participants play with the wiki software

A cohort wiki

This year we used a wiki as a common space for online communications during the institute. Instead of printing out copies of scribe notes each day, we entered them directly onto the wiki. The wiki evolved during the institute through the contributions of institute participants adding book club wikis, pictures, text, and presentations. Take a peek at how participants developed the cohort wiki:

<http://mwp2008.pbwiki.com/>

Interactive poetry using wiki software:

Amanda Marek designed the digital poem “Crossroads Revisited.”

www.crossroadsrevisited.pbwiki.com

Online Presentations using Google

Docs: This year a few teachers used Google presentations instead of Power Point to present their teaching demonstrations. They found that the online form of presenting easier to use and share with others. Visit the example teaching presentations below.

“Spoken Word, Slam, and Hip Hop Demo”

<http://mwp2008.pbwiki.com/Spoken+Word,+Slam,+and+Hip+Hop+Demo>

“Writing Towards Justice”

<http://mwp2008.pbwiki.com/Writing-for-Justice>

Upcoming Events

To keep abreast of MWP events, see also the “News & Events” page on our website:

<http://mwp.umn.edu/news/index.php>

9/27/2008: Technology Workshop:

Join us **Saturday, September 27th**, from 9-12pm, for a morning of hands-on technology learning. In response to several teachers interested in learning more about claymation and iMovie, we are providing a morning workshop devoted to the two forms of expression. The workshop will cost \$20, which covers parking, bagels, coffee, & good company.

To attend this workshop, please send an email RSVP by 9/20 to mwp@umn.edu stating you desire to attend the workshop and mail a check for \$20 made out to Minnesota Writing Project, U of MN, to Muriel Thompson at:
10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455,

10/1/2008: Reunion Workshop:

This year’s reunion, held on **Wednesday, October 1st**, will feature **Julie Landsman**, author of *A White Teacher Talks About Race*. See included flyer on the last page for more information.

Other Professional Events:

Monday 10/27/2008

Minnesota Council Teachers of English Fall Conference

Featured Speaker: Ralph Fletcher

Friday, 11/14/2008

A Day for Literacy at Saint Bens/Saint Johns

Featured Speaker: Will Weaver

11/20 - 11/22/2008

National Writing Project Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX

Confronting Critical Issues with Talented Teachers

by Ann Lindsey

Both Richard Sterling's farewell keynote address and the entire Urban Sites Network grew from educators bravely examining a seemingly simple question. "What do I do or say that shuts down student engagement?" As in 1990, the network's first year, teachers gathered in late spring to scrutinize this core query, connect with like-minded colleagues and attempt to assuage an "increasing teacher personal dissatisfaction with their ability to truly begin deep reflection on 'quiet and unquiet' issues in our classrooms". While Denver revealed itself slowly over the next three days during Latino neighborhood tours, an Arts quarter stroll, a writer's marathon setting off from Writer's Square in the compact, sculpture-rich downtown, and glittering six inch jewel encrusted matching belt buckle/cowboy hat ensembles, Dr. Sterling immediately provided each participant with a collective sigh of commonality and community when he detailed the goals the network declared nearly thirty years ago:

- 1. Listen carefully to our peers*
- 2. Discuss candidly how to respond when a teacher's personal set of cultures are in conflict with that of their students*
- 3. Explore the power of Inquiry*
- 4. Take a stance regarding the growing body of research linking how teacher responses empower struggling students to succeed*



Zhang Huan's life size self-portrait, Pilgrimage 2001

Interrupted over a dozen times with prolonged, enthusiastic cheers, Dr. Sterling emotionally concluded our first group gathering asking all to work diligently over the next three days to extend the power of the network throughout the conference sessions and onto the plane home, to continue the vital work of the Urban Sites Network today:

- Rethinking how people learn through cross-curriculum connections*
- Rethinking what people learn – "Knowledge is the currency of the future."*
- Rethinking where and when people learn, extending the definition of classroom into the real world.*

Such would be the concise reflection of my rewarding time in Denver this past spring if I could extract the emotions intrinsically embedded in the issues of class, race, culture and bias prevalent in urban school settings. I tried to capture the excitement I felt from the moment I began the Writer's Marathon at Writer's Square with five strangers, prepared to share quick-writes inspired by downtown landmarks...but passions and tensions threaded through the conference kept

oozling into my summary of the 2008 Urban Sites Network Conference - Reading and Writing for Understanding and Social Change in the Urban Classroom.

Again and again the word count climbed to prohibitive levels as my word choices inversely spiraled down into raw, expletive-laced stream of consciousness essays detailing the struggles we discussed and wrote about – our attempts to connect with rapidly shifting demographics within our classrooms while withstanding external pressures of AYP lists, have and have-not funding and public discourse on the nation’s “failing” schools. I could fill pages on all we learned about Denver’s hidden diversity tucked between its brand new sports stadiums and burgeoning city center. Rampant and overt homelessness, gang wars rivaling Los Angeles ripping the city into fractions of Latino and multi-immigrant neighborhoods and fervently protected isolation of the wealthy northern Cherry Hills suburb consumed our group and private writing experiences. Most powerfully difficult to encapsulate were excellent breakout sessions such as “Writing and Thinking about our Communities: Developing a Critical Pedagogy of Place”, “Writing from the Bridge: Exploring Civil Rights History through Guided Writing” or “Multi-genre Writing: Exploring Issues of Identity”.

Then I paused, remembered my audience, and let the metaphor of one of Denver’s most famous pieces of public sculpture speak for me.

Zhang Huan’s life size self-portrait, *Pilgrimage 2001*, confronts the casual walker with a cement nude male, prostrate, kissing the ground. The young Chinese artist created the work to commemorate one of his first acts of performance art after moving to New York in 1998. He endured January cold compounded by remaining in the prone position upon a seven-foot high block of ice for ten minutes outside P.S. #1 – The Contemporary Art Center. The work Zhang says is about “coming to America and his fear of New York City. I want to feel the city just as I feel the ice under me.” Zhang says he undergoes the feats of endurance because he wants to “experience the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual body.”

We are not so different, NWP educators and Huan. We strive to truly know the place from which our students arrive, and create a unique environment in which they can examine their fears, their hopes. We choose to endure climatic and self-imposed hardships for the betterment of both our students and ourselves. And, most revealingly, nakedly, we write about Dr. Sterling’s eloquent “quiet and unquiet” issues in, and for, the public at large. The reaffirmation of this vast sets of skills as artists and teachers was what I packed back with me on the plane. It was an honor to attend the conference. It is an honor to be an MWP TC. Remember what you each carry within you as face another group of students soon, ready to embrace all you contribute to the Art of teaching.



Zhang Huan's life size self-portrait, Pilgrimage 2001

Teacher Consultants On-Board

From July 14-18th, MWP held an **Advanced Leadership Institute** for educators who have recently retired or are close to that next step in their careers.

Like many writing projects, MWP faces the challenge of having quality facilitators available to work with teachers during the school day. Hoping to expand our capacity to serve schools and teachers, MWP recruited nearly or newly retired teachers to attend a one-week Leadership Institute from July 14-18, preparing them to serve as teacher consultants and presenters upon their retirement. Led by Marsha Besch and Joyce Malwitz (MWP outreach directors), the participants included Donna Clark, Kathy Dorholt, Eileen Johnson, Cheri Cooke, Kathleen Keating, and Patty Strandquist. An august group with an extraordinary depth of talent and wisdom, each person brought a unique talent to the table, including both classroom instruction and district office responsibilities.

In addition to celebrating each participant's contribution to the field of English education, the group reviewed the purpose and goals of MWP, current best practices in the literacy instruction, and the characteristics of adult learners. Of course, it wouldn't be a MWP workshop without daily writing prompts that primed our thinking and discussion for the day. We also read Tom Romano's biography *Zigzag*, an account of his life as a teacher, consultant, and author. An inspirational story, we were amazed at the parallels between Romano's career and our own. Capping the week, each participant presented to the group an outline of a possible MWP inservice, including Writing in the Content Areas, Using Technology to Enhance Writing Instruction, and The Writing-Reading Connection in the Elementary Classroom. It was quite a display of talent, and it just may be coming your way soon.

-- Joyce Malwitz



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Contributing Writers:
Lindsey Anderson
Candance Doerr
Ann Lindsey
Joyce Malwitz
Susan Perala-Dewey

Editing & Layout:
Kati Pederson

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<http://mwp.umn.edu>

Join us for the 2nd Annual MWP Reunion/
Renewal Workshop Day

**Improving Student Writing:
Closing the Achievement Gap**

When: Wednesday, October 1, 2008, 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m (CEUs available)

Where: U of M Continuing Education and Conference Center,
St. Paul Campus

Cost: \$50 — includes parking, meals/snacks (continental breakfast at 8:30 a.m.)

AGENDA

9:00 Welcome/ Writing Prompt

9:30-11:30 Break-out sessions led by MWP Teacher-Consultants

LUNCH

1:00-3:00 Keynote Speaker: **Julie Landsman**

“Making Student Voices the Center of the Classroom”

Julie often speaks on issues related to race, poverty and the achievement gap. She is the author of several articles and books, i.e., *A White Teacher Talks About Race, Diversity Days*, and newly published *Growing Up White: A Veteran Teacher Reflects on Racism*.

3:00 Final sharing

To register: By **Friday, Sept. 19, 2008** send payment to MWP, 10
Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 or
contact MWP@umn.edu to reserve a place and bring payment on Oct. 1.
