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A New Community of Teachers, Writers, and Leaders

Katherine Kunz (ISI 2011)

Buffalo High School and Middle School

In a career where teachers often find themselves isolated in their classrooms, their grade levels, or their disciplines, finding a supportive, professional community can be difficult. Then, when such a community is established, it requires numerous elements to work simultaneously in order to sustain it. For me, the 2011 Minnesota Writing Project served as a powerful induction into a supportive, professional community that I needed to further develop and hone my crafts. Further, it also served as a place from which I can begin—somewhat boldly, somewhat modestly—to lead.

Among others, elements working to create such a community for the participants in my Writing Project were watching demos, writing personal pieces, writing for others to read alone, writing to share in front of an audience, reading groups and book discussions, presentations, prompts, questions, and quotes. Yet one element resonates with me now louder than the others. It is the participants. All the people brought meaning to our community. We all shared experiences. One outcome of our shared immersion in new, often high-anxiety activities



The 2011 Invitational Summer Institute cohort

is that we were able to more fully help each other reach, extend, and grow our teaching and our writing selves. And although we are all unique, we created a balance despite our differences. Indeed, the various aspects of our characters helped create personal and professional steadiness in an often unsteady study of teaching and writing.

One of the reasons the community worked well was the far reaching experiences, interests, abilities, and personalities of our group. Had there been no hodgepodge of grade levels, geographical locations, subjects, specialties, or schools, we would not have been able to deeply reflect on the critical teaching of writing in all classrooms. Instead, I saw science come to life via a teacher's poetic musings on biology and astronomy, how clay can be used to activate spatial intelligence in order to tap into the beginnings of a writing piece, and how multimedia can be used to share our lives' significant moments. Had our institute been homogeneous, the richness that others' perspectives gave us would not have impelled us to push our thinking. It would not have pointed us in the direction of potential, true leadership. For who can truly lead in education if he or she does not consider multiple viewpoints and outlooks? Although we teeter-tottered with our various levels of knowledge, experience, curriculum and writing content, confidence, time management, and styles, our partial differences created a balance in the whole.

To be sure, there were things that all of us had in common. I felt (even though I know I flirt with the danger of speaking for others) all of us were kind, hardworking, humble, thoughtful, and excited. Most significantly, our willingness to take risks was born from these similarities. More than once someone said, "I don't see myself as a writer." However, write and write and write we did. We were required, therefore, to risk being someone who we never felt we were; to try proving that the old, proverbial leopard can change its spots; to risk being uncomfortable, vulnerable, exposed. Yet because we had seen, talked, heard, and listened to each other, our sameness emerged. Consequently, we also gained a better understanding of what our students are asked to do and became stronger teachers for it. Now we can build a safer classroom

environment, share our own experiences to break down barriers, and more carefully construct our lessons. Even if some participants still don't and never will say, "I'm a writer," they risked being one, if only for a while. It was a result of the community's commonalities that we could risk doing so.

So now we have a supportive, professional community. We can go back to our home schools, seek out the ties (even if they are dental floss thin) that bind us to our colleagues. And, hopefully, we will help lead them into developing meaningful, authentic writing curricula for their various purposes and with our collective students in mind.



Katherine and her writing group at Mount Olivet



Perusing documents in the Kerlan Collection

We Must Do

Cary Yang (ISI 2011)

Fair School (Downtown), Minneapolis

On day two of the 2011 Minnesota Writing Project Summer Institute, Muriel Thompson wrote these words by Goethe on the board: “Knowing is not enough, we must act. Walking is not enough, we must do.” That sums up why sixteen individuals were sitting in a classroom on the third floor of Nicholson Hall at 9:00 am in July with their Norcom composition notebooks open. They were getting ready to do.

Friends, family, and colleagues noticed that I seemed kind of busy for three weeks in July. In conversations the same questions would always come up. “Why are you doing this? It’s three weeks. What about your summer?” I would respond with “It is incredible being with a group of motivated and passionate teachers who are there because they choose to be and not because they have to be. They are there to take action on their work, and they just want to do.” So we did.



A writing group meets outside at Mount Olivet

We discovered ourselves as writers first and teachers second. Sheila O’Connor, our first but not our last author of inspiration, led us during our summer retreat at Mount Olivet on mining the natural resources of our life using the concept of place. We all began to search for our voices as writers. We challenged ourselves by trying new genres, pushing to stretch seed ideas, and getting through brain blocks. We, in the words of Candance Doerr-Stevens, were composting. We each watched ourselves and our peers be writers. We traded seats with our students and felt the anxiety of putting pen to paper and wondering if we really had anything to say. We read our writing out loud to hear the stories of our lives go out into the world and wondered if it was any good. Thank goodness we had the security blanket of our writing group. They did for all of us what we hope we can do for students—get them to believe that they can write. Once you get teachers to believe they can write, there is no stopping the possibilities of how they will teach it.

This is the magic of the summer institute. It is something that is subtle, and you don’t notice it at first. It grabs hold of you when you least expect it and presents itself loud and clear—writing is the medium for the narrative of everything. Whether it is a lab report, a reflection paper on *A Raisin in the Sun*, a text message, or a digital story, writing is what is used to describe our experiences. Writing is the lens we use to show how we interact with the world. So teaching how to do that is really pretty important. Knowing it wasn’t enough, walking it wasn’t enough. Doing was going to get the job done, and that is what we did for three weeks this summer. We took action on a really important job—teaching writing.

Sharing Their Words

Nightcrawler Hunting

Janice Laven (ISI 2011)

Cornelia Elementary, Edina

As a kid, one of the highlights of my summer was the Annual Nightcrawler Hunt in our suburban backyard. The exciting prospect of staying up well past my bedtime was surpassed only by the privilege of an outdoor hunting adventure with Dad.

Preparation for the Hunt began in mid-afternoon when Dad started the water sprinklers to saturate the backyard garden. This lured unsuspecting crawlers out of the safety of their burrows, up to the surface of the wet mud after dark. Nightcrawlers are prime bait for fishing: six to eight inches of slimy pinkish-brown invertebrate that stretch even longer when you're trying to extract them from a hole and they grasp anything that will prevent their capture.

I remember watching the Nightcrawler Hunt from the window for several years before I was finally old enough to participate. Sitting in the darkened kitchen, I watched flashlights flicker on and off as Dad and my two older sisters captured crawlers, then came in triumphantly, boasting of their bucket of bait. I was eager to join in this family tradition.

When I was eight, Dad decided I had the dexterity and patience to join in the hunt. By then, my older sisters had lost interest in this great sport and my little brother was too young to participate. We'd talked about the hunt for days, but still Dad asked at the supper table, "Who's going nightcrawler hunting tonight?" as if he didn't know.

"I am!" I volunteered, as my sisters mumbled something about having other plans.

"Great!" He said, "We start when it's dark."

I could hardly wait! After supper, Dad and I checked to see that the garden was good and wet. The moisture from the sprinkler made the whole backyard smell like a summer rainstorm: wet and warm. I helped Dad scoop mud into a Kemps ice cream bucket, a temporary home for the worms.

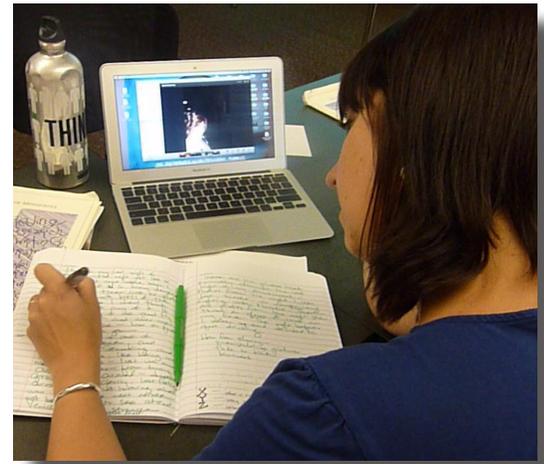
Back inside, I paced the house, looking for something to do while I waited impatiently for the sun to set. Finally, at dusk, I pulled on my long-sleeve top and jeans, tube socks and tennis shoes. When nightfall came and the backyard was pitch black, I peeked out the window to look for Dad with his flashlight. While I was still scared of the dark, I knew I was safe with Dad. I stepped outside, coated myself generously with OFF mosquito repellent, and I was ready! The cheerful chirping of crickets filled my ears as I walked across the wet grass that soaked my canvas sneakers. Dad eagerly flipped on his flashlight to show me a few nightcrawlers in the muddy bucket, and my training session began.

Side by side, Dad and I crept to the edge of the garden, darkened flashlights in hand. When Dad gave the signal, I flipped the switch, casting a circle of light on the wet black soil as Dad swooped in like a hawk to capture a juicy wet crawler. "Got 'em!" he exclaimed proudly, tossing the worm into the pail. I was in awe of my dad's tremendous speed.

After watching him repeat this well-honed skill several times, I was eager for my turn as crawler catcher. My first attempts were unsuccessful. This was harder than it looked. As soon as I turned on my flashlight, those slimy worms retreated into their holes faster than soda through a straw. I was the enemy, and they knew it. Sometimes I'd grab the end of the worm, only to be met by a surprisingly strong pull from the crawler. Sometimes, the resistance was so strong, it would break in two and I was left with half a worm.

"The trick," Dad coached, "is to grab 'em fast, and pin 'em down so he can't pull back into his tunnel." After a few more demonstrations from Dad, I was eager to try again.

"Got'em!" I said with a smile, as I held up my first catch. I admired the crawler for a moment before dropping



Writing at the ISI

him into the bucket.

“You did it!” Dad exclaimed, proud of his third daughter.

I swooped down to capture another. “Darn!” I complained, as it slipped through my fingers.

“That’s ok,” Dad encouraged. “Try again.”

Eventually, my perseverance paid off. “Got it!” I said as I added another worm to the bucket.

“I think you’re ready to set out on your own,” Dad suggested, boosting my confidence.

While he stayed nearby, I captured a few more sluggish nightcrawlers before the mosquitoes set in with a vengeance. Finally, we combined our catch, covered the bucket, and brought it to the cool basement for the night.

As I got ready for bed, I was too excited to sleep. Proud memories of my first Nightcrawler Hunt replayed in my head, competing with the anticipation of tomorrow’s adventure. In the morning, we’d go fishing!

On the beach at Chennai

JoAnn Blatchley (ISI 2011)
Creek Valley Elementary, Edina

It was called Madras then,
fifty years ago when
my father steered the ship
around this lighthouse.

I asked him to bring me a sari,
not knowing it was just
a piece of cloth.
And he did.
Peacock blue with threads of gold.

Here I stand on the beach at Chennai,
the white horse trots through the sand,
the beggar lady thrusts her infant into my face,
the turbaned merchant lays out his shells.

The tankers and freighters parade
in the shipping lane, today,
a half century ago.
My dad was here, lured
by the sea.

I walk into the waves, feeling the receding tide.



The beach at Chennai (formerly Madras), India



JoAnn on the beach

5th Annual MWP Fall Workshop

(Offered in collaboration with the
Minnesota Department of Education)



Open to all
interested
educators!

When: Saturday, September 24, 2011

8:30 a.m.- 3:30 p.m (CEU's available)

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

Cost: \$60 — includes parking, meals & snacks

TENTATIVE AGENDA

Morning —
Welcome/Writing Prompt

Sessions devoted to discussions of the standards related to Minnesota American
Indian writers — what they are and how to implement them in the classroom

LUNCH

Afternoon —

Keynote Session: **THE GREAT HURT** — a readers' theatre
presenting specific accounts of American Indian boarding
school experiences



Children outside the Indian boarding school at Cantonment, Okla., c. 1909

(image: Library of Congress)

The day will include plenty of time to write and share with other teachers!

LIMITED ENROLLMENT!

Registration Deadline: Friday, Sept. 9, 2011

Mail to: Minnesota Writing Project, U of M, 10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive, S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455

Name _____ Email _____

School and District _____ Phone _____

Home Address _____ City, State, Zip _____

English Language Learners (ELL) Will be the Focus of Future MWP Inservice

Sharon Ornelas (ISI 2005), Thomas Edison, Minneapolis

Bev Alsleben (ISI 2000), Retired ELL teacher from Saint Paul Public Schools

Planned over a year ago, the Focus on ELLs 2011 Inservice Institute (July 14-16 in Cleveland, Ohio) provided us with an opportunity to collaborate in person at the national level one last time. Our focus was to examine our site needs and capacity to sustain and build MWP in new and exciting ways through the lens of English Language Learners. About 60 participants from around the country reflected, wrote, reconnected, shared experiences, learned from each other, and investigated resources that would enable us to carry on our work. We began our work together by sharing our “funds of knowledge” (where we come from and what we know) with each other. After defining an English Language Learner, we heard presentations from two writing projects that have built capacity around ELL issues and developed new ELL programs. Roundtable discussions allowed us to explore technology and online resources, print materials, or classroom issues with ELLs. Breakout sessions presented more in-depth models of inservice and building capacity. After learning about available resources and what others are doing, we spent time examining our own sites and setting some goals for moving our work forward in light of the Common Core standards. Through it all we learned that NWP is alive and thriving with grassroots participation and the strong voices of consultants.

At the end of the Institute, we set goals for supporting ELLs and their teachers through MWP. Our main goal is to bring teacher and student voices into the public arena, so that others may understand the issues we are facing through our stories. To begin, we are participating in an online book discussion group on the excellent ning *KnowELLs* (<http://knowells.ning.com>) and exploring other resources to help us understand how others have used their stories to influence policy and opinion. We also hope to tap into MWP’s excellent digital storytelling assets as a possible vehicle for these stories that could allow more teachers and students throughout Minnesota to participate. Look for more information and opportunities coming soon.

View Sharon Ornelas as she speaks as part of the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center’s *Teachers Are the Center of Education/Teacher Voices* series, advocating for English Language Learners and other immigrant students at *Teacher Voices: Immigration, Language and Culture*.



To view, click the image

Digital Storytelling Surprises

Kristin Gifford (ISI 2011)

8th Grade Language Arts teacher, Anoka Middle School for the Arts

Kristin.Gifford@anoka.k12.mn.us

When I first heard that digital storytelling would be taught at the 2011 Minnesota Writing Project summer institute, doubts bombarded my brain. Is digital storytelling even a legitimate type of writing? If so, how would I ever use it in my classroom? Why would I want to go through the effort of teaching this technology to my squirrely middle-school students? And isn't digital storytelling somehow "cheating" when it comes to writing, like, too easy? I was sure I would never use digital storytelling beyond our afternoon workshop.

Skepticism in hand, I braced myself for the first training session with Candance Doerr-Stevens. We were told to bring some photos from home to encourage our writing process, and I played around with them on my desk, pushing them together and then yanking them apart like stuck magnets. Although I had thought the digital writing process would be easy, I found that ideas were not readily flowing. My brain felt wide-eyed, overwhelmed with the sudden complexity of weaving together pictures and music, story and sound, transitions and titles and meaning. When Candance said, "Everyone will finish one digital project before they leave today," I was ready to slam my head down at the table. It was impossible! So much harder than I anticipated! So much story to pack into such a small space. So many artistic decisions to weigh! How would I ever begin?

Well, I did begin. I sat there in the lab, and that day I started a digital poem that became my summer-long project. Through the process, the difficult, demanding, inspiring, exhilarating process, I discovered that digital writing is incredibly valuable. Not only did I work with all the traditional elements of poetry writing—enjambment, symbolism, word choice, figurative language, mood, and more—I also had to think critically and creatively about all sorts of important digital writing techniques. Layout, spacing, color, sound, movement, and font all became essential to the meaning of my poem as well.

Finally, digital writing allowed me to think big and communicate with a much broader audience than I otherwise would have. My poem became a collaborative project that I created using artwork by mother, watercolor artist Judy Thompson, and it is now viewable on her website (judythompson.mosaicglobe.com). This project has inspired us to continue working together, combining literary and visual arts.

Most of all, I realized that digital storytelling is extremely usable and valuable in the classroom. My doubts have been swept away. Not only will my students use deep thinking and creative writing in their digital storytelling projects, they will also learn important digital writing skills which will help them become proficient technology users. In addition, when the projects are shared on a class website, students will have the satisfaction of being real writers, sharing their work with an online audience. I can't wait to challenge students with this new type of creative writing!

Kristin created the following digital story in collaboration with her mother, artist Judy Thompson. The digital story was then published on the front page of the artist's website.

Our Frontier
Kristin Gifford

*To view the video,
click the image*





Exploring Digital Storytelling as Multimodal Writing

As Kristin describes above in her article “Digital Storytelling Adventures,” this summer’s institute placed special emphasis on digital forms of writing also known as “digital storytelling.” During a full day workshop, every participant created a short digital poem bringing together a variety of images, words, and sounds. These can be viewed by visiting our Digital Storytelling Gallery on the cohort wiki.

To view the webpage, click the image

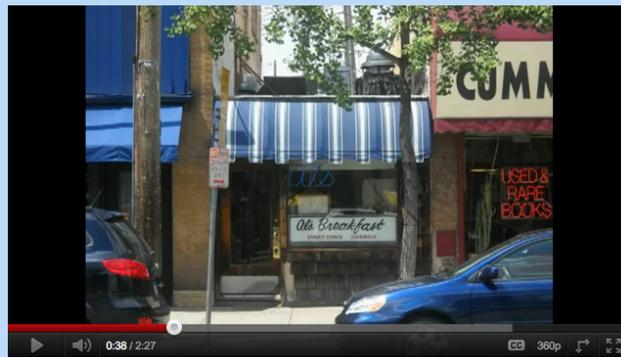
Several participants decided to go deeper into their digital storytelling explorations, using the genre as a way to explore place and/or fictional narratives.

Dylan’s Diner (transcript)

Zach Prowell (ISI 2011)

Highlands Elementary, Edina

It’s not often you find a diner the size of a railroad box-car in a busy metropolis. Nestled between a trendy coffee shop and an empty store looking for a tenant is this little carved out oasis playing Bob Dylan in the background. It’s no wider than the length of an old school Volkswagen Beetle that just passed by; you almost have to duck to get in. It all lends to a magical essence. You feel as if you found something that the rest of the world has yet to discover. Who knows, maybe it’s reserved for special souls who happen to stop by. Bob Dylan could have found inspiration in a place like this. However, a wall of foreign currencies intermingling with sentimental dollars proves people from all over are aware of this exceptional existence, adding even more to this unique place dripping with character. The proprietor Al is also the one flipping jacks and sizzling the bacon. I’m sure there were countless eggs cracked and coffees poured, but each one is made just for you.



To view the video, click the image



The Year, The Moment

Julie Stauber (ISI 2011)

Proctor High School

To view the video, click the image

Announcements & Upcoming Events

Save the Date!

5th Annual Fall Workshop—Saturday, September 24th, 2011
Come reconnect with fellow MWP professionals as we explore state standards related to Minnesota American Indian writers. What are these standards? How do we implement them in the classroom? See the flyer on page 6 for more information and register before Friday, September 9th.

MCTE Fall Workshop—Monday, October 31st, 2011

Author Deborah Appleman will be the featured speaker for the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conference. For more details visit <http://www.mcte.org>.

5th Annual Writing Central: The Writing and Restorative Conference at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University—Friday, November 11th, 2011

Keynote speaker will be Joyce Sidman, a Minnesota poet and recent Newbery Honor winner. Additional breakout sessions will be offered. For more information visit [their website](#).

New TCs Offer Guidance and Leadership

This year we have three new teachers who have offered their time and expertise to help advise and lead ongoing activities for our writing project. We thank them for their service. If you would like to be involved with the MWP Advisory Board or a cohort representative contact us at mwp@umn.edu.

Julie Stauber —MWP Advisory Board

Julie teaches at Proctor High School in Proctor and joins us from the Lake Superior Writing Project. We look forward to hearing her insights from northern Minnesota.



Jennifer Kohan—MWP Advisory Board

Jennifer teaches middle school language arts at Minnetonka Middle School East. Jen also offers consulting services to writers, educators, and administrators. We welcome her expertise.



Carmen Barbone—2011 Cohort Rep

Carmen teaches at Shakopee High School and has been part of the College in the Schools Composition program. We look forward to the wealth of knowledge she can share related to writing instruction and curriculum.



Supporting MWP

In this critical time of decreased funding for our project, please consider showing your continued support by making a gift to the Minnesota Writing Project (Fund #6464). For more information visit [the giving page on our website](#) at <http://writing.umn.edu/giving/#mwp>.

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2011–2012

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