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A Few Words on Remembering

Bianca Suglia (ISI 2012)

My experience at the Minnesota Writing Project this past summer would certainly resonate with Marcel Proust's belief that "the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes." Indeed, this Institute provided me with an exhilarating voyage into renewal, discovery, and self-discovery as a writer, a teacher, and a learner! For three weeks, I was part of an initiation process alongside brilliant and talented teachers who encouraged one another to reach across cultural and linguistic boundaries, used their life and professional experiences to inspire others, and rediscovered that writing and education are two of our most important links to the world around us.

From the first moment I stepped onto the U of M campus, I knew that I had found the ideal venue through which I could positively and creatively combine and expand upon two of my lifelong passions: writing and teaching. Being immersed into an environment that nurtured and challenged the writer and teacher in each of us also meant acquiring several unexpected but meaningful lessons on courage, taking risks, being part of a supportive teaching and writing community, and celebrating the twists and turns of any worthwhile journey.

In addition to writing diamond poems at Weisman Museum and exploring literacy topics within our reflective practice groups, we also stepped inside exciting writing marathons and short writing activities based on witty prompts, while



2012 MWP ISI cohort

other times we basked in the revelation of deep, personal stories that hid behind the photos used for our digital projects. Learning advanced editing techniques, exploring different genres of writing, experimenting with digital storytelling, receiving feedback from other teachers, all of these are treasures that I will continue to implement in my own classroom.

Many would agree that there are times when the cycle of daily activities and routines may make us forget the significant details that abound in our professional and personal lives. That is why it was so remarkable to be in an educational and creative environment where you were reminded of the details of what makes a teaching day unique and spectacular. More than anywhere else, the three weeks spent at the Minnesota Writing Project helps you *remember*..... You *remember* that being a writer implies enjoying the arduous process of writing just as much as seeing that final copy. You *remember* the excitement of a brand new idea or that inspiring prompt that touched a chord in you, or the poem that comes to fruition because of the determination and encouragement of a cohesive writing group. You *remember* the initial shyness of talking to teachers next to you at the retreat and the trust level you reached before reading aloud a deeply felt piece. You *remember* that being a teacher means always learning from those around you, perfecting your craft, and teaching for equity. You *remember* that there is an artist in each of us that can provide our students with endless possibilities to discover who they are and who they want to become. Lastly, you *remember* that a classroom is a place where there are no ordinary moments because there is always room for meaning, learning, friendship, and hope.

The Minnesota Writing Project allowed me to look at our beautiful world of teaching and writing through new eyes and to recapture the magic of these arts. *Merci beaucoup.*

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Becoming a writer

Cherise Storlie-Kristoffersen (ISI 2010)

I have never thought of myself as a writer, and that is why being a part of the Minnesota Writing Project has been so meaningful to me. It has been and continues to be an organization embodied by people who are empowering—empowering at every level. The facilitators empower by challenging all of us to write and they write with us. The participants are teachers who bravely share a window into their classroom by showing, not telling, us all about their best practices. Together teachers inquire into what their own practice looks like or areas where they would like to make a change, and together with other teachers they then go back into their own classrooms with a plan—a plan that is generated through collaboration and with inspiration and guidance from current professional teacher literature to move practice forward and push educators to reflect on their own philosophy of teaching, getting at the how and why of what happens in teaching writing.

The teaching of writing and the modeling of writing that happens in this manner at the summer institute bring a “humanness” to writing that I have experienced in no other place throughout my years of being educated or working as an educator. Together, in a supportive environment, we are forced to “practice what we preach.” We know that to be a good writer, one must write, but teachers *never* have enough time and writing is often (maybe even unconsciously) left until later or seen as an indulgence when the “to do” list is overwhelming. The space created at the institute allows you to ponder the importance of carving out time and making time for a writerly life—the life that keeps you honest about writing. Writing is not easy; however, by writing and writing and writing some more, sharing our craft, and taking a risk at the artistic side of writing together, teachers and students in dialogue are an empowering force, one that can create some published writing that is nearly magical.

Have you heard about ...?

A new quarterly column written by Melinda Christianson (ISI 2012), who teaches at Underwood Senior High.

Schoology is my favorite education-related website right now. Think Facebook for school, and you've got Schoology. Use it for free with your own classes, or get your whole school on board. The news feed keeps students up on what's going on in all their classes, and the calendar syncs with their smart phones. There's an app for it, too. My favorite feature: students upload assignments, and you can comment on them and grade them within the website. Download the assignments as a compressed file, or just leave them in Schoology to retrieve whenever you want. Start discussions, give quizzes, take polls—it's a game changer. (www.schoology.com)



Evernote is a great way to keep track of just about anything. If you've used Diigo, this is a great step up. Create separate notebooks for anything you want—for example, sub-topics in a research paper. When students find an article, video, or website that relates to the sub-topic, they simply put it in the applicable Evernote notebook. Notebooks can be easily shared for peer collaboration. Teachers can also share notebooks with students for access to notes, PowerPoint presentations, and more. The website is great; there's also a smartphone app and download available for the computer. The website includes a video on how Montclair Kimberly Academy is using Evernote schoolwide—worth watching! (www.evernote.com)



Remind101 gives teachers the ability to safely text students and parents. Teachers create a Remind101 account and add classes; then students and parents sign up with a code via text. You can add unlimited classes and send unlimited texts. Use the website or app to send messages, and your real phone number does not appear. Teachers report improved communication and grades as well as a saving of teaching time. Forget to remind students about the rough draft due tomorrow? Need permission slips in ASAP? Just text it. This is a one-way communication device; parents and students will need to email if they have questions about your text. (www.remind101.com)



Storify is a new wave in digital storytelling. Write on any topic and pull in pictures, text, and video from social media networks—Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, and more. The outside sources are automatically given credit for their contributions. It's a great way to talk about weaving in source material and using it wisely. Check out my first Storify at www.storify.com/melindakay. There are many possibilities for using this as a teaching tool or incorporating it into a writing assignment. (www.storify.com)



Several participants in this summer's institute adventured into the realms of professional writing. Below is an excerpt of Sonja Olson's essay on selecting multicultural literature, informed by her years of teaching at Johnson Senior High in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

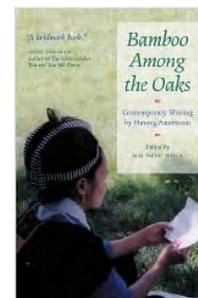
Reviews and Questions for a Multicultural Classroom Library: Empowering Your Students, Closing the Achievement Gap, and Having Fun Doing It!

Sonja Olson (ISI 2012)

Who in my classroom is missing from my library? I teach in St. Paul, and I have a lot of Hmong students in my classroom, but when I started at my job I had zero books with Hmong protagonists. If you have students who aren't represented on your shelves, add voices like theirs to the library! This is a great way to make them know they belong in your classroom (and academic spaces as a whole). If I'm not sure about a book because I haven't read it or I don't know much about that culture, I'll ask those students to read the book for me and tell me what they think. They've never turned down the chance to be an expert on their own culture. Sometimes they don't finish the book, but it's never a negative experience for the student or me.

Bamboo Among the Oaks, edited by Mai Neng Moua

Moua both edits this anthology and contributes to it, doing both jobs well. The stories in the book range from the adrenaline-filled "Mrs. Pac Man Ruined My Gang Life," to the introspective "My Dad the Mekong and Me the Mississippi," to the funny "Hmoob Boy Meets Hmong Girl." I've had many students check it out of my library, but I've also pulled stories from it to complement my curriculum.



Are the non-white characters in the books I'm choosing relegated to the role of a sidekick, or similarly, is there a white "savior figure"? Empower **all** your students to be strong leaders, not sidekicks, in the field of their choice. While a blend of cultures is wonderful, far too often students of color are tokenized. Instead of picking *The Blind Side*, a story that tells of a wealthy white family in Tennessee taking in a homeless black teen, choose *I Beat The Odds*, the same story written by Michael Oher, the teen who went from homelessness to the NFL, with lots of help along the way. Or better yet, buy both books and let the football player in your 3rd hour compare the two.

47, by Walter Mosley

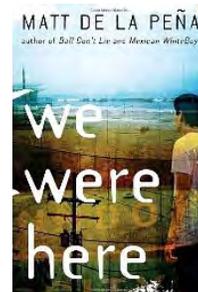
This book is part fantasy, part historical fiction; it takes place in the South, pre-civil war, and is told from the perspective of a young African-American boy. One of those elements often throws off a reader, but those who enjoy it appreciate how the themes of science fiction and African-American history combine for a dynamic social commentary. Also, the audio version is spot on.



Does the book that I'm considering perpetuate stereotypes? Look for books that undermine stereotypes, rather than reinforce them. This can usually be solved by having several different types of stories. I worried that the stories in my library featuring African-American males were all about life on the street. While they were often popular, I knew I had to show more options. Upon a student's request, I bought a copy of *The Rose That Grew From Concrete* by Tupac (featuring the lyrics of his songs as he originally wrote them down in his notebook). I asked a basketball coach for a list of books that my students would like—or at least a list of current stars, so I could buy their biographies. Instead of a story about negative peer pressure, I found one on positive peer pressure: *We Beat the Street*, a non-fiction story about three African American boys who made a pact to become doctors.

We Were Here, by Matt de la Peña

This fast-moving novel set in California shows de la Peña at his best. He lets you really get to know the main character, and you're over halfway through the novel before you find out what landed him in juvie (unless you're good at foreshadowing). The dialogue is slangy and filled with swearing, using a journal format to let the narrator be as emotional as he needs to be. Two secondary characters, Rondell and Mong, add a fuller picture of incarcerated teens.



Open Institute Illustrates Opportunities: Create, Grow, Share

Stephanie Rollag (ISI 2009)

On the last day of the MWP Open Institute, teachers laughed along with shared stories of working the concession stands and favorite State Fair moments. We leaned in to hear the memories of being a student and to discover the mystery behind a character. As each teacher shared his or her story, we celebrated our voices as writers and our work from the week.

As our weeklong Open Institute came to a close, I was reminded of the power of the NWP philosophy. Our learning community was celebrating the ways we had grown as writers and teachers of writing. The principles of the Writing Project were exemplified throughout our week.

Our time together valued the way that we learn when we engage in the writing process. Between Monday and Friday teachers met in writing groups and took part in each step of the writing process. They felt the struggles and celebrations that come with writing and a connection to what students experience when they are asked to write. While institute participants reflected on this process, they reiterated that writers continually need time to write, time for feedback, and an audience with which to share stories.

Listening to the questions teachers brought to the Open Institute showed the value of taking time for research. From the different districts, subject areas, grade levels, and school demographics came a variety of questions about teaching writing. Whether focusing on using new technology in the classroom, exploring ways to collaborate with other teachers in a district, or discovering ways to make more time for writing, each teacher brought a question that directly impacts students and their writing. While many of the inquiry questions for our week connected, participants took time to explore resources that answered their individual questions.

In addition, the week was full of discussions that emphasized the value of time for teachers to learn from each other. As teachers investigated questions and ways to implement the writing process, they became valuable resources for each other, filling their notebooks with new websites, book titles, practical ideas, and new perspectives. This community of teachers provided an immense pool of knowledge when given the chance to share.

As teachers, we instinctively look forward, continually considering the ways to implement new ideas into our classrooms. When we sat in a semi-circle on the last day of the institute, participants shared the questions they had about writing, the things they discovered, and the plans that they made to bring these ideas to life. There was energy in the air as we considered what will happen in classrooms this year and what stories will be written next.



2012 Open Institute cohort at the Weisman Art Museum



Members of the Open Institute and the Invitational Summer Institute at the Weisman

In Their Own Words Big and Small, Digital and Print

As always, the summer institute produced fruits of writing ranging from poetry and narrative to Sonja Olson's professional essay on multicultural literature, included in this newsletter. This year we 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 or narrative bringing together a variety of images, words, and sounds. These digital compositions can be viewed by visiting our [Digital Storytelling Gallery on the Cohort wiki](#).

Some participants decided to go deeper into their digital storytelling explorations, using the genre as a way to explore people and places in their lives. For these more extended pieces, each person wrote and recorded a voice-over narration. Included here is just a sampling of the many fruits. We encourage you to visit all of this year's writings in [MWP's online anthology](#), which will be online by mid-October.



A writing group at the June retreat



The Hallway

Angela Osuji

Bell rings, motion
Cacophony of sounds, wavelengths and frequencies changing
Molecules moving, intermingling
Mixtures, homogenous and heterogeneous

The hallway
Couples coupling
Interactions, reactions
Synthesis, single replacements,
Double replacements, even decomposition

The hallway
Students collide
Impact, nothing
Impact again, nothing
Impact again, again, bam

Activation energy reached, disorder,
Reaction, violent reaction
Energy released, system cools
Calm, minimum energy realized
Order restored.

Porcelain

Rebekah Lund

The Ming Vase
Sat there
Like a dream
Waiting for flowers to fill it

This heartland
Minnesota
Its early fall days
Crisp with frost
Ethereal beauty
Fills them

She gathers the last true blossoms
To fill her heirloom vase

The last before winter comes
Porcelain and white

Digital Storytelling



Click on the image to see the video

Ima Akwa

Angela Osuji

North Senior High, Minneapolis

Fabric—that intertwining, threading, looming bolt of beauty formed and fashioned from strong, flexible, delicate hands.

Fabric—that foundation of the family that symbolize the women of my village.

Fabric—My fabric she has been the moment she walked into my room on that cold march Minnesota morning of my first year of teaching in the land of my sojourn- my mentor, coach, teacher and friend she has been. She weaved me into the fabric of the Minnesota school system with a weave ever so tight that covers me with warmth and brings a smile to my face. ...



Click on the image to see the video

Remembering

Katie Houlihan Belanger

Benilde-St. Margaret's School, St. Louis Park

Even though I didn't know my grandpa, I can still feel his presence in our family home—where the ghosts of pain and joy come in the humid Wisconsin air. Somehow my birth and his death are connected. Who he was has captivated me, and I've tried to discover this man from my mom's stories and my own imagination. ...



Click on the image to see the video

Of Two Sisters

Jessica Dockter Tierney

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Because I have an older sister, I have never had to do anything first or alone. My first day of school, we dressed in our finest with matching totes and lunchboxes, and I followed her lead across a busy street. My first amusement park ride, I clung to the ladybug car terrified, but I smiled because she smiled. ...



A writing group at the June retreat

Announcements & Upcoming Events

Upcoming Workshops

Save the Date: *Check the [MWP News & Events webpage](#) for updates*
6th Annual Fall Workshop—
Saturday, September 29th

Come reconnect with fellow MWP professionals as we feature Linda Grover, the author of *The Dance Boots*. Grover teaches American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

MCTE Fall Workshop—Monday, October 29th, 2012

Cris Tovani, author of *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*, will be the featured speaker for the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conference. For more details [visit the MCTE website](#).

6th Annual Writing Central: The Writing and Restorative Conference at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University—Friday November 9th, 2012

Keynote speaker will be writer David LaRochelle. Additional breakout sessions will be offered. For more information, [download the conference PDF](#).

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 be a cohort representative, contact us at mwp@umn.edu.

Katie Houlihan Belanger—MWP Advisory Board

Katie teaches English at Benilde St.-Margaret's in St. Louis Park. Katie has quickly become an avid consumer and producer of digital stories. [View her own digital story, "Remembering," earlier in this newsletter.](#)



Clara Hutchinson—MWP Advisory Board

Clara teaches at Central Senior High in St. Paul. Clara also offers much experience working as an AVID mentor and facilitator in Minnesota and at the national level. We welcome her expertise.



Melinda Christianson—2012 Cohort Representative

Melinda teaches at Underwood High School in Underwood. We look forward to the wealth of knowledge she will share related to technology in the classroom. Look for [her quarterly column](#) in each *MWP Newsletter*.



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 please [visit the giving page on our website](#).

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Contributing Writers

Katie Houlihan Belanger
Melinda Christianson
Candance Doerr-Stevens
Rebekah Lund
Sonja Olson
Angela Osuji
Stephanie Rollag
Cherise Storlie-Kristoffersen
Bianca Suglia
Jessica Dockter Tierney

Editing & Layout

Debra Hartley

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