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Learning, Connecting, and Growing in the ISI

*Daniel Muro LaMere (ISI 2013)
Humboldt High School, Saint Paul*

When I first learned that there was something at the University of Minnesota called the Minnesota Writing Project, my interest was piqued immediately. I knew nothing about it beyond the name. As an English teacher, I deal in writing all of the time, and even do my own writing when I have the luxury of time. I needed to find out more.

Colleagues were talking about it. Some had been a part of the project, or knew others who had. Others were planning to give part of their summer to it. Eventually, after they'd been through the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI), I mined them for information.

“So...it’s teachers, but you’re working on writing? And teaching? Or teaching writing?” My friend was patient with me, and attempted to explain, but I still didn’t get it. I did understand that he



MWP 2013 ISI cohort

thought he'd be better at teaching writing to his students, and that he'd worked on a one-act play. But I still didn't get it.

This put me in an awkward position later on. I had interviewed for the ISI (I knew that, whatever it was, it was good. At the very least, it was University staff dealing in writing—that was enough for me), and was accepted. I was, to my great delight, an academic fellow at an institution that had once placed eighteen-year-old me on academic probation.

“So, what is this thing you're doing this summer?” My parents thought at one point that I was going to be teaching a class.

They weren't entirely wrong. During the two-day retreat at the surprisingly beautiful Mount Olivet Retreat Center in Farmington, I was reminded that each of the fifteen participants would be responsible for a one-hour demonstration lesson. And so I did teach, on the exhilarating topic of generating an argumentative thesis. But there were also fourteen other lessons, during which I was a student, learning from my peers and the rich knowledge and experiences that they bring to the craft of teaching.

Really, how often do we get to watch each other teach?

At the retreat we were asked to state our goals for ourselves for the ISI. Mine was to learn how to teach writing. One might be forgiven for assuming that as an English teacher I already knew how to teach writing, and sure, I knew a couple things here and there, but I think many in our profession do a lot more assigning and assessing of writing than we do actual writing instruction.

“Really, how often do we get to watch each other teach?”

At the Minnesota Writing Project this summer, I learned how to teach writing. I learned it by participating in a writing group of my own wherein I workshopped my own writing. I learned it by delivering and participating in demonstration lessons. I learned it by reading a choice text about

writing instruction in a reflective practice group with two of my peers.

Not only do I feel more competent in my own abilities, but I also feel connected to a community of educators, both my K-12 colleagues who participated in ISI with me, but also staff of the University of Minnesota's Center for Writing and others who lent their time and talents to this summer's ISI.

We are so often given mandatory professional development that does little to develop us professionally. The Minnesota Writing Project's ISI did much to help develop me into the teacher I want to be for my students.



Laughing at the Mount Olivet retreat

A Changed Mindset

Megan Peterson (ISI 2013)

Lake Nokomis-Wenonah, Minneapolis

Some people are writers; I am just not one of them. Embarrassingly enough this was my mindset coming into the Minnesota Writing Project. Even though I didn't believe in myself as a writer, I was passionate about teaching writing to my 2nd graders because I felt it was one of the only times during the day when students took ownership over their work. While writer's workshop (the framework we used during writing time) was working like a well-oiled machine, my lack of confidence as a writer was beginning to stall my writing instruction. Thankfully I was accepted into the Minnesota Writing Project, which not only provided me with an authentic experience to learn and grow as an educator, but also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of what it truly means to be a writer.

It has been my experience, as an elementary school educator, that even though we are expected to teach all subjects well, reading and math continue to dominate the professional development we receive. The Minnesota Writing Project summer institute has refreshed and richened my perspective on how we teach writing, providing me with realistic strategies, a wide variety of resources, and opportunities to learn from a professional community of diverse educators. I feel that I have now started to gain some expertise in teaching writing, which will not only benefit my instruction, but also increase my confidence as a teacher and leader in my professional community.

While I have gained a great deal of knowledge on how to teach writing, it was with my experience as a writer that proved to be the most influential. Yes, I now believe in myself as a writer, something I would not have expected before participating in the MWP summer institute. I was terrified of sharing my own writing for the first time; however, my fear of being judged was quickly replaced with perspective, helpful feedback, and encouragement from my writing group. As a writer, I now feel better equipped to connect to my students and to teach the craft of writing.

The Minnesota Writing Project challenged my personal belief system in a way that left me feeling empowered and confident in my skills as an educator and writer. I am eager to begin a new school year and to use the knowledge I've gained to create a classroom full of writers.

“Yes, I now believe in myself as a writer.”



Megan and her writing group at Mt. Olivet

Writings from the ISI: A Confluence of Voices

Participants in the 2013 Invitational Summer Institute generated writing—in print and digital form—that was provocative, insightful, funny, and moving. Several pieces focused on the joy and challenge of teaching while others explored the metaphor of commuting or the legacy of family. We are pleased to share excerpts from a few ISI participant voices here and encourage readers to visit all of this year’s writings in the [MWP 2013 Invitational Institute Gallery](#), which will be available by mid-October.

Excerpt from “Square Peg” *Nick Ross (ISI 2013)*

As he told it, Isidro was born in Portland, Oregon, to a family of two older brothers, three younger sisters, and parents who were still married but not living together. A few years back, his father went to prison. Isidro claimed not to know the exact reason for this, or how long his father would be away. He suspected it had something to do with dealing drugs or guns, as he heard his uncles partook in the former and remembered his father’s collection of the latter. His oldest brother took Isidro under his wing and introduced him to the North Portland gang of which he was a member. The violent side of the lifestyle did not sit well with Isidro; “I’m peaceful—kinda hippy like that,” he said with a grin. He was attracted to one aspect of gang life: graffiti writing. Armed with a backpack full of Sharpies and paint markers, Isidro began developing his craft on the walls and buildings of the city. “I get so juiced,” he explained, “bombing and running, with cops on us. It’s what I do best.” Moving from middle school into high school, a hobby became a passion, and a passion became an identity. “I’m a writer,” Isidro stated frankly, referring to his graffiti works, not school essays.

Lessons from My Son *Andrea Nelson (ISI 2013)*

You’re only three years old,
But that’s old enough,
To understand,
That things are changing.

The thing I want you to understand,
Is that your importance in my life is not.

I know that I’m the parent,
And you’re the child,
So I should be teaching you,
But the truth is,
You’re the one who’s teaching me. ...



Click on the image to see and hear Andrea’s digital story

Absorption

Merry Davin (ISI 2013)

Looking back on that time
with the length of a 40 year lens
she could only conclude
that the confluence of their lives
was predestined in some way.

She wouldn't have necessarily said
that God in His Heaven had moved
the stickpin of him
from Chicago-land to America's Dairyland
and then drawn a red line
connecting him to her.

It was more the case of a subtle
and immutable law of Nature at work:
she was the quiet brook
drawn to the showier stream.
It was, perhaps, inevitable.

Falling back on that potential truth
helped her feel less naïve,
a little less needy,
a little less to blame
for falling so easily, so foolishly,
for falling so far.

But then
that truth
meandered into deeper wondering:

How *does* the brook feel
when it meets the showy river
and ceases to exist
as its own shy self?

Are the river's depths *gentle*
as it absorbs the stream,
or does it gulp greedily
like predator on prey?

Which is *really* the greater
as a result of the exchange:
the one who has taken
and carries it forward?

or the one who has given
and loses her name?



Merry teaching her demo lesson on confluence

7th Annual Minnesota Writing Project Fall Workshop

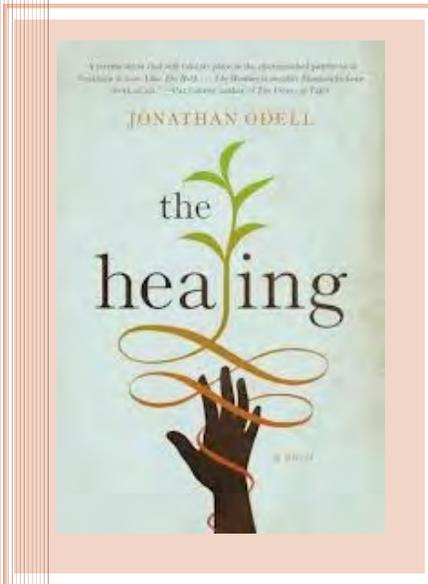
A fall gathering to share lessons and resources around
Creating Communities Through Literacy

Keynote Session

Jonathan Odell

Author of *The View from Delphi* and
The Healing

*Books will be available
for purchase.*



Breakout sessions by Minnesota Writing Project teachers who are implementing standards related to community and justice

Roundtable Discussion by teachers involved in MWP's collaboration with Trondheim Writing Project in Norway

Charon Tierney, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) Language Arts Specialist, will provide an overview of the standards and field questions.

When: Saturday, October 5, 2013, 8:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. (CEUs available)

Where: Minnesota Department of Education, Conference Center A
1500 Highway 36 West, Roseville, Minnesota 55113

Registration Information: \$75 —includes registration, continental breakfast, and lunch

To register: send payment by **Friday, September 13th** to MWP,
10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.

(Please make checks payable to University of Minnesota.)

For additional information: email — MWP@umn.edu or
call 612-625-6323

Offered in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education. For standards information contact the English Language Arts Specialist at Charon.tierney@state.mn.us or call 651-582-8643.

Minnesota and Trondheim Writing Projects Institutes: An International Collaboration (Et Internasjonalt Samarbeid)

Debra Hartley (ISI 2008) and Kirsten Jamsen (ISI 2004)

During the week of 24-28 June 2013, we led a group of five experienced MWP TCs in an exciting new Advanced Institute in collaboration with Norway's Trondheim Writing Project (Trondheim Skriveprosjekt), with the goal of engaging in a shared cross-cultural inquiry into how writing is taught and how teachers can learn together in Norway and the United States.

This new Advanced Institute is part of an ongoing collaboration with Sør-Trøndelag University College (HiST), located in Trondheim, Norway and home of the Norwegian National Center for Writing Education and Research. The Center works with classroom approaches, learning strategies, and forms of assessment in order to improve the teaching of writing in kindergarten, primary, secondary, adult, and teacher education.



Trondheim Writing Project summer institute 2013 participants

Under the leadership of Cherise Storlie-Kristoffersen (ISI 2010), a Minnesota teacher who lives in Norway, MWP leaders were invited to visit HiST to share information about our site and visit Norwegian schools in 2011 ([see the Winter 2012 MWP newsletter](#)) and Norwegian educators visited us and toured MWP TCs' classrooms in 2012 ([see the Spring 2012 MWP newsletter](#))—leading to four additional teachers from Norway attending the MWP 2012 ISI and two attending an ISI in Washington State.

This past year, these TCs in Norway created the Trondheim Writing Project (TWP) site and kicked off their first Summer Institute, which will span from April 2013 to April 2014. We timed the MWP Advanced Institute to run parallel with the TWP's full week together in June, so Minnesota and Norwegian teachers could meet via Skype and participate in a real time Norwegian teaching demonstration. With a seven-hour time difference, we also created an asynchronous blog where we could get to know one another better, share our writing and our responses to professional literature, give feedback on the teaching demonstration, and share teaching resources.



Writing at the TWP summer institute

Here are some of the blog voices of participants in our "twinned" Institutes:

As a member of the Minnesota Department of Education Global Literacy Advisory Board (GLAB), the interaction with our Trondheim, Norway colleagues was exhilarating and affirmed my belief in international mindedness and global literacy. I now have evidence of their feasibility in Minnesota's classrooms. This I will take back to GLAB. I look forward to a continued cross-cultural collaboration. *Takk, Trondheim! -Angela Osuji (MWP ISI 2011)*

The writing everyone shared on Friday was wonderful. It amazed me that such meaningful work came from a little bit of time to reflect. I also love the connection with our Norwegian partners and hope that through this collaboration we can continue to support one another and learn from each other. *-Bev Alsleben (MWP ISI 2000)*

We look forward to continuing these conversations during the Trondheim Writing Project's follow-up sessions in November 2013 and April 2014. We hope that by hosting twin institutes in Norway and Minnesota during this year, we will create a solid foundation for future cross-cultural exchanges among our teachers.



MWP Advanced Institute participants saying “Hei” to TWP colleagues. From left, Ann Thompson, Kirsten Jamsen, Debi Kregel, Ann Moeller, Debra Hartley, Bev Alsleben, and Angela Osuji.

Transitions at MWP

Farewell and Thank You, Candance Doerr-Stevens!

We bid Candance Doerr-Stevens a fond farewell and wish her the best in her new adventures as Assistant Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We appreciate her many contributions to the Minnesota Writing Project over her six years as the Graduate Teaching Assistant and will miss her. Best of luck, Candance!



Welcome to Jessie Dockter Tierney—MWP Assistant Director

We are pleased to welcome Jessie Dockter Tierney as the new Assistant Director of the Minnesota Writing Project. Jessie is a former middle school English teacher and recent graduate of the doctoral program in Critical Literacy and English Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. As assistant director, she will help plan the Invitational Summer and Open Institutes, plan and co-teach workshops during the school year, and collaborate with Muriel to support the ongoing work of the writing project. Welcome, Jessie!



Finding Comfort in the Wobble: Reflections on the 2013 Open Institute

Jessica Dockter Tierney (ISI 2012; MWP Assistant Director)

As instructors for the Minnesota Writing Project's 2013 Open Institute, *Writing for Social Justice*, Stephanie Rollag and I knew that we wanted to explore what it means to teach—and write—for social justice in the English/Language Arts classroom. What we came to learn with and through the participants in the open institute was that teaching through the lens of justice is complicated and hard work that is ultimately and wholly worthwhile. And it is, as Linda Christensen reminded us as we read her texts throughout the course, as much about joy as it is about justice.

I have come to think of this complex position between joyful and just teaching as what Associate Professor Mark Vagle, who spoke to us on the third day of the institute, referred to as the “wobble”—that space where difficult questions about race, class, gender, and equity must be asked and addressed even when answers are not necessarily clear. As it turns out, I wasn't the only one who appreciated the wobble as a metaphor for social justice teaching and writing. One participant, for example, wrote in her course reflection:

I feel incredibly lucky to have been surrounded by such thoughtful educators . . . trudging through the unknown and often vulnerable spaces of teaching empathy. I've learned and re-learned through

“I feel incredibly lucky to have been surrounded by such thoughtful educators . . . trudging through the unknown and often vulnerable spaces of teaching empathy.”

this class to make space and maintain space for personal and reflective writing that enable students to tap into and reconstruct realities . . . I have learned such valuable insight from all of you about thoughtful and gutsy teaching. I will continue to check in with my own biases, my positioning, as I approach text and as I approach this personal and vital work with young people. Illuminating injustice is a complex and on-going struggle, and I'm learning to sustain that complexity and find comfort in the wobble.

During the two-week course that took place in June, we read, viewed, and discussed texts related to social justice themes such as identity and community, language and power, immigration, and social class, with Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* and *Teaching for Joy and Justice* as core texts. Drawing from writing project philosophy, we also started each day with a prompt to get us thinking, writing, and sharing. Stephanie and I selected prompts for the course that would allow us to create what Christensen called the “collective text” of our lives. In other words, we explored themes in our own writing to connect to larger social issues and, as importantly, to build a community of writers and thinkers who learn from the experiences of others.

We also learned from a visit by Mark Vagle and Angela Coffee, both from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota, who spoke to us about their work on the **CLASSroom Project**, which is aimed at supporting teachers in making classrooms places where children and families are not advantaged or disadvantaged as a result of social class. During their visit, they led us in exploring our personal experiences of social class and situating those within larger social contexts. Many of us continued writing on this theme for our final pieces.

We also learned from our visit to the Weisman Museum. While there, we applied the **Artful Writing** “perceive prompt” to the works in the museum and considered how visual images and artwork, such as Lewis



Lewis Hine. *Young Boy Coal Miner*, 1909-13. Photograph, 13 5.8 x 10 11.16 in.
Weisman Art Museum

Hines', "Young Boy Coal Miner," challenge us to broaden our understanding of writing for justice.

Participants in the course also had the opportunity to research a social justice-related topic, which they presented to each other as a literature review or lesson plan. The topics researched and lessons planned ranged from understanding the impact of assimilation to naming and appreciating rules of African American Vernacular English to redefining beauty and learning to act for justice. Each lesson and literature review asked teachers to consider the challenges and promises of lessons centered on justice, and we look forward to learning from participants how their lessons and research impact their teaching in the school year to come.

Writing groups were also a central focus of the course. We asked each participant to write a piece related to a social justice theme, and writing groups, which met each afternoon, helped writers articulate their purpose and message. Genres included memoir, narrative, poetry, and a play script while themes explored gender, class, race, and praising our own histories. You can read two pieces from this course on the following pages. Jackie Van Geest's poem, *Because I Am Celia Eisenberg*, takes on the perspective of a victim of the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire in New York City where 146 immigrant workers died. Celia Eisenberg was one of many individuals who jumped to her death after realizing there was no other exit from the building. The tragedy had a significant impact on legislation to improve working conditions for laborers. And Chris White's poem, *Up and Over*, is a beautiful reflection on the impact of social class in his life.

Finding comfort in the wobble of teaching for social justice doesn't just happen, I've learned. It requires a community of people dedicated to open dialogue about difficult topics. It requires tapping into our own histories and stories. It requires reflection upon what it means to take action in teaching and writing. It requires space and time to write and think about education and justice. Most importantly, it requires that we practice acting for justice so that we may live those actions in our teaching. Our hope is that participants of the 2013 Open Institute will welcome the joys and challenges, that is, the wobble, of teaching and writing for social justice.



Image of Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire on March 25 - 1911. From [Wikipedia](#)

“Most importantly, finding comfort in the wobble of teaching for social justice requires that we practice acting for justice so that we may live those actions in our teaching.”

Up and Over

Chris White (2013 Open Institute)

*“Darkness blankets me with worries, regrets,
and tears
as I wonder how I am here and everyone I love
is there.”*

(Stephanie Jones, 2012)*

Here’s what it’s like
to be pushed upward.
You stand on the backs
that have bent to tie your shoes,
that have held drywall
and pots and pans and papers,
that now shake and spasm
beneath the weight of your dream.
Reluctant you remain standing
because you’re told to.
You learn to balance and
not look down,
never look down,
but of course you do.

Did you ever want
to leave the ground?
At what point were you
no longer down
to earth?
The inevitable, the progress
in the name of Love and God
and America, but especially
Love.

Up! Up! Climb
the invisible ladder.
Spend your time and
our money, don’t forget
to borrow and save
and work. Hard.
It will be okay, of course;
there will always be
Love.

Here’s what its like
to go *there*. Returning,
you are no longer the same,
you guess, to them with
the backs that bore you.
Somehow they are not either,
though they’ve remained.
You wonder if you betrayed
or are betrayed
or if anyone could have even known.

So yes, you went there,
voting for hope and handouts,
remembering unemployment and shame,
how your father tried
and cried and accepted
work below your tall image
of him. After all that,
how could you not
empathize?

There’s still pride
and love, and now sadness
too. The grass is really
more colors than green.
You’ve discovered
that this is a fence you’ve climbed,
not a ladder. That we stand
on this plane together,
gazing into ourselves,
eye to eye.

Here’s what its like
to teach. I read them,
faces full of writing
in blood and streaked
but not erased by sweat,
lifted on the backs
they love. I ask myself,
“Will you go *there*?
Will you simply gaze
with one eye between
the fence posts, or will you
open the gate with
this key you’ve been given
and step over?”

Here’s what it’s like:
unfinished
undone

*Jones, Stephanie and Mark D. Vagle (2012).
“The Precarious Nature of Social Class-Sen-
sitivity in Literacy: A Social, Autobiographic,
and Pedagogical Project.” *Curriculum Inquiry*,
42:3. Malden, MA: Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Because I am Celia Eisenberg

Jackie Van Geest (2013 Open Institute)

Because I am an immigrant
Somehow
I am more disposable
Even more than
The scraps of cloth
Unusable
For the shirtwaists we make

Because I am from Russia
I am not from here
Even though
I have lived in the land of opportunity
For five years
on East 1st Street

Because my family is not from here
My name does not mean much
I am each face among the dozens
Of dozens
of Eastern European Jews
and Italian Catholics
in 1911
Whose only purpose is to turn a product
And know someone else
Is making the real profit

Because I am a scab
A union worker
A lowly employee
I am scrutinized everyday
Waiting in line

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As the guards check to see
That I haven't taken the undesirable scraps home
Or got bold
And walked out
With an accidental spool

Because I am a factory worker
A young girl of 17
I can only see the sun in the wee hours of the morning
Peering through the factory panes
Overlooking Greene and Washington Place
Or on my walk
D
O

W

N

The

BL

OC

KS

Of Manhattan

Because I am a Yiddish speaker
My words don't count
They are not a currency
If I make them English
They only count
A little more
They are worth no more
Than a week's 12 dollars

Because I am disposable
Even more
Than the scraps of shirtwaist cloth
I get no cut in line
To escape

The

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

5th

6th

7th

8th floor spark

9th floor inferno

Unaware of the cotton blaze
Caused by a careless toss of a cigarette

Into a barrel of scraps

Underneath the

Wall

to

wall

Table workspace

Because I am a worker at the Triangle Waist Company
Safety is not a concern
Small fires are common
Planned to burn
Easy to extinguish
Before or after hours
Exiting with insurance money
32 thousand reasons to
put in jeopardy
the lives
of
hundreds

Because I must wait

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Unlocked door
Or
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To the polished
Professional
10th floor
Or
To the roof
Or to a coll
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Fire escape
Which only reaches down
To the
10th
9th
8th
7th
6th
FLOOR
Or jump to meet my fate
I am trapped

Because I am disposable
I become
What's walked upon
The stone sidewalk

B
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Because I am Celia Eisenberg
I am identified by my brother
Despite my
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D
Skull

2013 National Writing Project Urban Sites Network: The Stories of Social Justice

Stephanie Rollag (ISI 2009)

Fifty years after the streets of Birmingham, Alabama, were filled with the tensions of the Civil Rights Movement, I found myself on those streets with teachers from the National Writing Project (NWP) Urban Sites Network to examine how writing empowers students and teachers to enact social change. As I listened to stories of the Civil Rights Movement with over 400 educators, it became clear that Birmingham was the perfect place for teachers to consider the meaning and possibilities of writing for social justice. Throughout the conference we heard the stories of the streets surrounding us in Birmingham and drew lines to stories of youth enacting civil rights across classrooms, countries, and time. As speakers, teachers, and students spoke, we were reminded that there is both hope for teachers and a need for teachers to engage in the challenges of educating for social justice. In fact, it was the stories told throughout the conference that offered teachers a roadmap to bring social justice into classrooms.

Tell the Stories

As we walked through Birmingham from the Civil Rights Institute, to the historic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and along the Civil Rights Heritage Trail, I was reminded of the stories of the Civil Rights Movement and its impact on our history. The historic events surrounding these places were brought to life as Janice Kelsey shared her memories of being a teenager involved in the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. While learning her school subjects and how to maintain friendships, she also learned why and how to be an intentional, peaceful protestor.

“In fact, it was the stories told throughout the conference that offered teachers a roadmap to bring social justice into classrooms.”

I was engrossed in her personal story and newly connected to the 1963 events in Birmingham. My attention peaked when she said that she had rarely shared her story publicly. Her story reiterated my understanding that it is important for our students to tell their stories. While their stories may be sitting on the pages of their notebooks in front of us, others may be unaware of their perspectives. Not only do they need to write their stories, our students need to

tell their stories beyond the walls of our classrooms. Just as I needed to be reminded of Kelsey’s lived history, people need to be reminded of students’ real and personal experiences.

Support the Stories

Jose Antonio Vargas, award winning journalist and multimedia storyteller, reminded NWP teachers of the courage needed to take action for a socially just cause. Vargas is known for his Pulitzer Prize winning writing for the *Huffington Post* and *Washington Post*. As a writer and activist for immigrant rights, Vargas passionately and bravely appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with other undocumented immigrants, calling national attention to varying perspectives surrounding immigration in America.

As he shared his journey with teachers from the Urban Sites Network, he emphasized that he was able to become a successful writer and activist because he always had teachers and community members who supported him. Vargas encouraged teachers to remember our personal impact on students by helping them engage in writing, listening, and sharing their stories. His personal connection speaks to the role teachers have as supporters of justice.



Stephanie on the Freedom Walk

Believe in the Stories

Emmanuel Jal brought his energy and message to the Urban Sites Conference in the form of stories and music. Jal told his own dramatic account of surviving life as a child soldier in Sudan. Although he was honest about the lowest moments of his journey across Sudan, he shifted into a hopeful beat of hip-hop music focused around reconciliation and peace. As teachers from across the United States swayed and clapped to his beats, we felt the hope that Jal found in sharing his stories. He talked about the ways telling his stories allows him to move forward in his life and offered youth a model of finding hope.

Just as Jal sees the possibilities of sharing his stories, our students need to understand that their experiences are valuable. For Jal, teachers of writing can help students reflect on their current situations and recognize how they can impact the future.



Stephanie with Emmanuel Jal

Hear the Stories

Rami George Khouri, a political columnist, author, visiting scholar, and recipient of an international peace award, reminded us to continually pay attention to stories of youth activism. He narrated acts of youth activism in the Middle East that may go unnoticed.

During his presentation, he challenged educators of social justice to do two things: 1. Listen to the stories of activism within our classrooms and around the world. 2. Understand the role of youth in activism. He pointed to the courage of youth and the recognition that they have the most to lose when it comes to social activism because it affects their futures. According to Khouri, teachers must work to be aware of the role youth have in activism and share that information with our students.

Motivate Acts of Agency through Stories

A former correspondent for PBS and NPR, Charlayne Hunter-Gault easily captured the attention of her audience as she reflected on her experiences of activism and journalism. She recalled some of the stories she reported and her own experience of entering the University of Georgia in 1961. At the time, she was one of two African American students allowed into the college. She shared the ways that her motivation to make a change overcame her fears of taking on integration. While Hunter-Gault knew her actions were important, she also knew they would be difficult.

With the same strength in her voice, Hunter-Gault called on teachers to look for ways to motivate and encourage students to become activists. Though it is challenging, teachers can encourage students to take up a social justice perspective by sharing stories of courage and the necessity for activism.

Bring Ourselves to the Stories

Beyond the stories of these speakers, the conference was filled with sessions featuring teachers' ideas for bringing social justice to classrooms and examples of the work students in their classrooms were doing. By the end of the National Writing Project Urban Sites Conference, teachers were ready to return to their classrooms with a renewed sense of hope and a desire to help students bring their stories to action.

To learn more, take a look at these websites:

[Fifty Years Forward](#)

[Jose Antonio Vargas](#)

[Emmanuel Jal](#)

[Rami G. Khouri](#)

[We Want Peace](#)

[Charlayne Hunter-Gault](#)

Time Away to Write and Talk! MWP Retreat at Breezy Point

Muriel Thompson, MWP Director

For three days in August, seven enthusiastic MWP teacher consultants met to write and share at Breezy Point Resort. (See Susan Perala-Dewey's "Writer's Retreat Morning Prayer" on the next page.) The teachers who responded to the initial invite to use a timeshare as a writing retreat location were mainly from rural schools. They sought a place to write together—one that might replicate the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute while providing time to share issues specific to teaching in rural settings. The relaxed environment became a perfect setting for writing together and discussing ways to strengthen MWP network activities for Greater Minnesota.

Teachers attending the retreat represented various rural areas of our state and included representatives from our "satellite" Lake Superior Writing Project. After an initial summer institute partially funded by the National Writing Project, this group has found ways to continue to offer one-week institutes, holding their fourth one just this past summer. They continue to explore ways to establish a stronger network in that region and to facilitate conversations among teachers leading to a better understanding and appreciation for Native American culture, history, and literature.

Several issues surfaced during the lively discussions at Breezy Point, such as the impact of the severe poverty in some communities which can limit student access to technology, dwindling student populations, lack of ethnic diversity, instability of administrative staff, and the need for strong networking to support teachers who feel isolated and desire more collaborative opportunities.

We discussed several possible ways to enhance MWP's outreach in the state, such as selecting a common text and gathering teachers in various locations to discuss it. Such occasions would also provide an opportunity to have MWP teacher consultants share the significance of the Minnesota Writing Project in their private and professional lives.

By the end of the retreat, the teachers were relaxed, yet energized, and left Breezy Point with new ideas for improving the teaching of writing in their rural communities.



*Teachers who attended the retreat (from left to right):
Jennifer Lundin, Braham Public Schools
Ann Moeller, New Ulm Cathedral High School
Ann Thompson, St. Croix Catholic School, Stillwater
Susan Perala-Dewey, University of Minnesota – Duluth
Meridel Kahl, St. Scholastica College
Renee Montgomery, Cloquet High School
Muriel Thompson, University of Minnesota – Twin Cities*



The perfect place for writing, sharing, and discussing

Writer's Retreat Morning Prayer

Susan Perala-Dewey (ISI 2008)

Dear Words ~

Gather yourselves here with me today
Paste your letters on my page
Bring me your speed and collective energy
Present me with tools of power for my passion

Send along strong nouns for images
Indelible verbs to move me inward
Enticing adjectives to set apart
Mine from yours from ours
Help me cull my creative spirit
Axe abstractions
Invite invention

Please gather yourselves here
Bless this pen
Commune with me today.

Attend MWP's Monthly Meet-ups for Another Year of Learning and Social Fun

Jen Kohan (ISI 2011)

You've undoubtedly experienced this phenomenon: when people with a common passion and enthusiasm come together, amazing things happen. We know that Minnesota Writing Project institutes and workshops have always served as a crucible for transformational teaching and writing, so if you haven't already, be sure to attend one of MWP's Monthly Meet-ups this year.

Last year, Steph Rollag (ISI 2009) and I hatched a plan to connect "friends of education" through a series

of informal social events around the Twin Cities. Typically, we gathered in an interesting space to write, play, and explore potential applications and ideas for learning, then debriefed nearby over snacks and drinks.

Minnetonka High School reading specialist Stephanie Brondani attended several meet-ups and noted, "The monthly meet-ups I've been to have been the highlight of my week due to the interesting and varied meeting locations, and the wonderfully fun and energizing participants." She also recommended that teachers "attend as often as possible!"

We visited the Foshay Tower, Walker Art Center, Science Museum of Minnesota, Minneapolis Institute of Art, and Hennepin County's Minneapolis Central Library, as well as other notable landmarks and watering holes. Our end-of-the-year spring outing brought us to Psycho Suzi's Motor Lounge on the banks of the Mississippi River.

In all of these spaces, whether we had a group of five or fifteen, we came away recharged and loaded with ideas for teaching and learning. The collaborative electricity was infectious. This year, we have planned a new calendar of meet-ups to further explore our "learning ecosystem." We also want to aim for an increased and wider attendance, while maintaining the informal, registration-free nature of the events.

We hope you will join us at these upcoming meet-ups!

September 26: Minnehaha Falls + Sea Salt Eatery

October 17: The Loft Literary Center + Grumpy's Downtown

Events run from 6:00 to 9:00 pm, with socializing before and after our 7:00 pm writing prompt. Come join us when it works best for you, and bring a friend or two! We usually make it to the second, "debriefing location" by 8:00 pm. Look for more information on [MWP's Facebook page](#). Also follow our meet-ups on twitter at [@MWPconnect](#).

Announcements & Upcoming Events

MWP Fall Workshop—Saturday, October 5

Please join us for our seventh annual fall workshop, to be held on Saturday, October 5, from 8:30 am to 3:30 pm.

This year's theme will focus on Creating Communities Through Literacy and will feature Jonathan Odell, author of *The View from Delphi* and *The Healing*. See [page 6](#) of the newsletter for registration information and check the [MWP News & Events webpage](#) for updates.

MCTE Fall Workshop—Monday, October 28

Jeff Wilhelm, founding director of the Boise State Writing Project and author of numerous books about literacy and literacy education, will be the featured speaker for the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conference. For more details, [visit the MCTE website](#).

New TCs Offer Guidance and Leadership

This year we have three new teacher consultants who have offered their time and expertise to help advise and lead ongoing activities for the 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.

Daniel Muro LaMere—MWP Advisory Board

Daniel teaches at Humboldt High School in St. Paul. At the start of the 2013/14 school year, Daniel will launch an interdisciplinary Immigrant Studies Program for ninth graders at Humboldt that connects English with social studies and the needs of the school's diverse student body. Read Daniel's reflection on the summer institute on [page 1](#) of the newsletter.



Andrea Nelson—MWP Advisory Board

Andrea teaches sixth grade at Anoka Middle School for the Arts. During this year's ISI, Andrea produced a digital story about her growing family and dedicated it to her son, Jack. View Andrea's digital story, "Lessons From My Son," on [page 4](#) of the newsletter.



Abby Rombalski—2013 Cohort Representative

Abby has taught grades 6-8 at the FAIR School Downtown for over a decade, and this fall, she enters the Critical Literacy and English Education doctoral program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. We look forward to having Abby on campus!



Minnesota Writing Project Advisory Board Members

2013–2014

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