

Minnesota Writing Project

Spring 2003

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Report from NWP Spring Meeting



My trip to Washington, D.C. this year proved to be a bit unusual. It all started with a request from my grandson. Late in March a letter arrived introducing me to “Flat Ben” and asking if I would take him on an adventure. (Flat Ben was created after the class read *Flat Stanley* by Jeff

Brown.) Since the NWP Spring Meeting was approaching, I decided that it would be the perfect trip for him. My traveling companion Micki St. Sauver seemed to thoroughly enjoy having Flat Ben along and made certain to include him in our activities..

As the invitation to the Spring Meeting says, “There’s no better time than April to be in Washington, D.C. The weather is perfect, the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, and the city is alive with the energy of spring.” Indeed, we were not to be disappointed. Bright sunshine and warm temperatures greeted us as we left our hotel for the Capitol. Mary Beth Blegen arrived to join our delegation, and we looked forward to an exciting day.

The day’s activities began in the stately Mansfield Room on the Senate side of the Capitol, where we heard from NWP’s key supporters in the House and Senate. One of the most interesting speakers was Representative Rush Holt from New Jersey. Bumper stickers in his state read, “My Congressman is a Rocket Scientist.” A graduate of Carleton College, he strongly advocates an integrated approach to the teaching of science for he believes that writing helps students to sharpen their thinking and to express who they are.

Armed with packets from NWP and our own information our MWP, we plotted our day’s appointments. After visiting our two senators’ offices, we hiked to the other side of the Capitol to start our visits with our representatives. However, at this time Mary Beth experienced quite a bit of abdominal pain and ended up taking a taxi to the George Washington Medical Center emergency room. Micki and I were quite concerned, but continued on our way. We had a very exhausting, but satisfying, day of sharing information with our legislators. (Unfortunately, Mary Beth ended up having surgery while she was in D. C. Now back in Minnesota, she is slowly recuperating.)

Friday was a day to share experiences with writing project colleagues from around the country. The keynote speaker Jim Harvey, author of *A Nation at Risk*, shared information about his latest work with the National Commission on Writing. To read a recent op-ed piece by him, go to http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/opinion/134688604_harvey04.html. Harvey’s talk was followed by roundtable discussions on topics such as academic writing, the reading/writing connection, school partnerships, writing about social justice, writing for English language learners, and more. I gained fantastic tips for Writing to Read and am anxious to share them with you.

“Flat Ben,” Micki, and I did get in some sight-seeing: the Library of Congress, the DAR museum, plus a visit to the George Washington Medical Center to see Mary Beth! Our last night in D.C. we dined at Sequoia’s, a lovely restaurant on the Washington Harbor. From our table we could look out on the Potomac and see the Kennedy Center in the distance.

After I returned, I assembled a picture journal of Flat Ben’s Trip to Washington. My grandson Ben could not have been more pleased as he shared the book with his first grade reading class—perhaps another first for the National Writing Project!

- Muriel Thompson, MWP Co-Director



MWP TCs pose with Flat Ben outside the Capitol.

Writing Retreat: Final Call

June 19-20 at Mt. Olivet Retreat Center, Farmington, MN. Join us to enjoy the tranquil setting, write for personal and professional purposes, reflect about your writing and teaching, walk the nature trails, and renew acquaintances. Retreat includes all meals, lodging, and attendance at writer Alison McGhee’s June 19 presentation. See <http://mwp.cla.umn.edu/> to register.

"Strategies for ESL Teachers" Workshop

On March 8, 2003, approximately seventy-five teachers from several metro-area districts gathered, despite a raging snowstorm, to participate in the "Literacy Strategies for ESL Teachers" workshop. The presenters who teach ELL students ranging from middle school to college created an interactive environment in which participants learned and shared a variety of techniques for engaging ELL students in becoming active readers and writers.

Sheryl Holt, U of MN Coordinator for Non-native Speakers, shared strategies for engaging ELL students in analyzing their own writing and devising correction strategies with other students or with the instructor. She suggested guiding students to locate their own grammar and spelling errors within a document. Also, she provided examples of prompts that teachers could pose to students during individual writing conferences. Examples ranged from higher order concerns (asking "What's the most important thing you want to say here?") to lower order concerns (asking "This word is too formal. Can you think of another word?"). Teachers were able to discuss how they might incorporate these strategies into their repertoire.

Bev Alsleben (TC 2000) facilitated a lively presentation on guiding students to use visuals in the thinking and writing process. Bev shared anecdotes of engaging middle school students in visual activities, particularly an assignment in which students received disposable cameras to create photo albums that depicted their neighborhoods. This assignment allowed them to share details about their cultures and backgrounds while developing their writing skills in using descriptive language.

Melissa Borgmann (TC 2001) facilitated a presentation entitled "Critical Response/Image Explosion." The assignment, originally designed for high school students, consisted of a sequence of interactive activities where students personally connect with a poem or other work. Students are encouraged to read a line of the provided piece in a round robin fashion and then copy up to three personally significant or moving lines in their journals. The assignment culminates with students writing their own poems illustrating a similar mood or theme.

Anne Lowe (TC 2002) and Shelly Bertrand, Washington Technology Magnet MS, co-facilitated a workshop on using writers' notebooks for middle school ELL students. Their presentation reinforced the need for students to feel an emotional connection to writing and to view writing as a means for self-discovery. They included anecdotes from a middle school Level 3 ESL class of students who had all started kindergarten in the United States. In addition to introducing students to writing prompts that are designed to "mine the heart," Shelly and Anne required students to complete a Writing Survey in which students evaluated their own writing in light of questions such as, "What does one have to do in order to be a good writer?" and "What helps you the most to improve your writing" and "What is the best piece you've ever written? What makes it good?"

Overall, all facilitators provided examples of vivid, engaging activities, and guided participants through valuable opportunities to collaborate with other teachers who wish to meet the needs of and engage ELL students in their classrooms. - *Erin Harley, MWP Research Assistant*



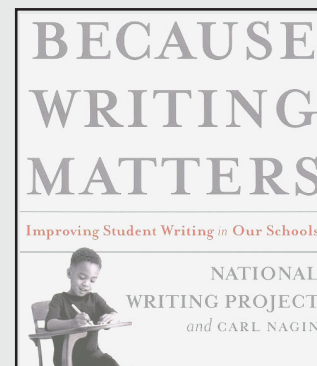
Sheryl Holt checks in during a small group activity.

New Resource from the National Writing Project

Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools ISBN: 0-7879-6562-6
by the National Writing Project and Carl Nagin
\$16.00* (*Special NWP discount price. List price: \$24.95)

At last a book that is both comprehensive and up-to-date on the status and importance of writing in America." —Donald Graves, Professor Emeritus, Education, University of New Hampshire

(from National Writing Project, <http://www.writingproject.org/pressroom/writingmatters>)



Border Conversations

A four hour trip to Fargo, North Dakota in April didn't much appeal to me, especially since winter didn't seem to want to leave. However, the weather cooperated and my traveling companions made the journey much more enjoyable. On April 11, 2003, Marsha Besch and Micheal Thompson traveled with me to help present a workshop in conjunction with the Red River Valley Writing Project. Two other MWP teacher consultants, Kathy Dorholt (TC 1997) and Paul Carney (TC 1992), joined us. Along with RRVWP teacher consultants we presented a workshop at the Ramada Plaza Suites and Conference Center for educators from Minnesota and North Dakota. Participants were able to attend four breakout sessions with topic choices relevant to elementary through college levels. Evaluations from attending participants indicated that it was a very worthwhile venture. In the future we hope to offer more of these joint projects with our neighboring NWP sites. - *Muriel Thompson, MWP Co-Director*



Kathy Dorholt facilitates a session at the Border workshop.



Eileen Johnson of Edina Public Schools and Norita Dittberner-Jax peruse flyers announcing summer MWP events.

Timely Conversations at Annual Dine and Discuss

On April 30, 2003, MWP held its annual "Dine and Discuss" for administrators from Institutional Member Districts. Marsha Besch, MWP Outreach Coordinator; TC Micki St. Sauver (TC 1994); and Muriel Thompson, Co-Director facilitated the discussion. The agenda consisted mainly of discussing upcoming MWP summer events and issues related to staff development and the need to keep updating teachers on available opportunities. Participants contributed perspectives on what has worked in their districts, and discussed the changing Minnesota educational climate and ways to ensure that students succeed regardless of changes to standards. As budgets tighten in the districts, our partnerships with Institutional Member Districts are crucial to providing quality opportunities for teacher learning and collaboration. - *Erin Harley, MWP Research Assistant*

MWP Summer Opportunities

One-day workshops

July 17: Writing in the Visual Arts Guest presenter: Deborah Keenan
Gain strategies for using the visual arts as a springboard for writing.
Draw from the strength of the Weisman Museum of Art, including such collections as American modernism and Korean decorative arts.

July 22: Adolescent Literature
Experience strategies for integrating reading/writing assignments
Investigate popular works, including new releases

Place: University of Minnesota, East Bank, 116 Amundson Hall; Time: 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Cost: \$75 per person per workshop; \$60 per person per workshop for participants from Institutional Member Districts.

Open Institute

Middle School Mosaic: Reading and Writing in the Middle School

July 14-25 (Monday through Friday both weeks)
Place: University of Minnesota, East Bank, 116 Amundson Hall; Time: 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Reflect on your writing, participate in a community of writers, consider theory and practice of writing instruction, gain strategies for helping the struggling reader/writer, study and discuss reading and writing standards.

Attend the two workshops: Writing in the Visual Arts & Adolescent Literature

\$275 per participant from Institutional Member District/\$300 per participant for Non-Member District (fee includes textbook cost). Graduate credit available.

(registration information available at <http://mwp.cla.umn.edu>)

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Minnesota Writing Project Co-Directors:
Lillian Bridwell-Bowles
Muriel Thompson

Outreach Coordinator:
Marsha Besch

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Minnesota Writing Project
University of Minnesota
227 Lind Hall
207 Church St. S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455