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Documentary Filmmaking as Community Advocacy

Candance Doerr-Stevens (ISI 2007; MWP Teaching Assistant)

As part of a recent professional development project with Edison High School in Minneapolis, MN, I had the opportunity to work alongside a teacher using documentary filmmaking with her students. The eighteen students in her class, an advanced language arts course for English language learners, were mostly juniors and seniors. As part of their reading, research, and writing about community issues, the students made documentaries about issues of poverty and educational access.

My tasks were to assist the teacher in designing the curriculum, work with students in small groups as they drafted their voice-over narrations, and provide technical assistance and tutorials while working in the computer lab during the final weeks of the project. Working on this project was a blast. Not only do I love working with innovative teachers up for literacy adventures big and small (Ms. Ziegler, whom the students affectionately called “Ms. Ina,” was definitely of this ilk), but I also crave working one-on-one with the students. On this project I got to know many of the students very well, helping them to work through their expression of ideas when writing the voice-over narrations and then again as they combined their own writing with the interview footage, images, and music.



Solving Poverty (2:54). Producers: Chan, Mai, Khoua
(Click on image to view video)

Far from what some may call glorified dioramas, these iMovie video projects were very involved, requiring students to critically analyze the data they had gathered on their topics. In addition to “regular” academic research for the project, the students were required to gather primary resources in the form of interviews with relevant community leaders. Weaving interview clips alongside voice-over narrations is not an easy task. Students had to decide which information and interview clips to leave behind, as well as which to include and in what order. Working in groups of three, the students also had to negotiate with their peers regarding which images and music to use in order to add emphasis and tone to their arguments. I remember hearing many heated conversations related to whether a group should use Michael Jackson’s “You Are Not Alone” or Ben E. King’s “Stand by Me.” The group members wanted the mood to be serious but not sad.



Poverty vs Education (6:19); Producers: Alarif, Yair, Yaresi
(Click on image to play video)

As I continue my work with media composition as it relates to literacy learning and instruction, I hope to continue working with students as they make media. More importantly, I hope to continue working with adventurous literacy educators like Ina Ziegler, who knowingly jumped into the messiness of media composition in the classroom.

Working with Ms. Ziegler as well as with several other K12 educators using digital media forms of writing, my understanding of writing instruction has become more and more complex. While I love to teach word choice and playful phrasing, I realize that words alone are not enough. In order for our students to argue their points and advocate their views for 21st-century audiences, they must know how to use media in rhetorical ways. How will they gain these critical literacy skills without schools providing the opportunities to create with images, video, music and sound? So while Ms. Ziegler’s students used documentary to advocate for issues pertinent in their community, I use print, the medium of currency in my profession, to advocate for a broadening of our community values, for a change in how we see writing in the lives of our students.

The final documentaries can be viewed by visiting the course website—[**Listening to Learn, Speaking to Persuade: Digital Storytelling for Community Advocacy.**](#)



The Dangers of Poverty (4:36); Producers: Alaa, Abdulahi, Mercy
(Click on image to play video)

In order for our students to argue their points and advocate their views for 21st-century audiences, they must know how to use media in rhetorical ways.

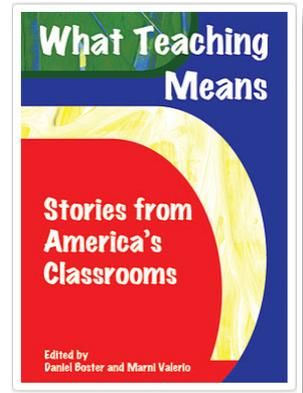
“Going Meta”: Teachers Publish on the Profession

A scholarship of teaching is not synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of “going meta,” in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning—the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it and so forth—and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it.

— Hutchings and Schulman (1999) “The Scholarship of Teaching: New Elaborations, New Developments”

The past few months have shown a surge of publications by our local Teacher Consultants (TCs) at the Minnesota Writing Project. In these articles, chapters, poems, or books, we see our colleagues stepping out of the dynamism of daily teaching to still their minds long enough to reflect on the professionalism and humanism of teaching. Stop by our library in Nicholson Hall to peruse some of these writings, or look for them online.

MWP TCs Amanda Marek and Charley Barniskis have published their work in the book *What Teaching Means: Stories from America's Classrooms*, edited by Nebraska writing teachers Daniel Boster and Marni Valerio. The book features 39 essays that chronicle the everyday work of teachers from across the nation. As one contributor describes, “*What Teaching Means* was created as a reaction to the national scrutiny on teachers and the work they do in their classrooms. While people think they know what teachers deal with on a daily basis—most everyone has gone through schools—the national debate seemed to lack teachers’ stories and observations. Hence, this snapshot of classrooms from around the nation.” To find out more about the contributors and to purchase the book, [click here](#).



From “Teaching Spanish and Learning Latino” by **Amanda Marek** (ISI 2008):

In the story from the previous question, is the protagonist more like the tortoise or the hare?

- the hare, because she is overconfident
- the tortoise, because she’s persistent
- the tortoise, because she’s too slow to win
- the hare, because she’s the fastest



I look over my student’s shoulder as she scrolls her cursor over each answer—abcd abcd abcd—She finally clicks ‘c’ and moves on to the next question, annoyed and confused because she knows the slow protagonist did win the race but can’t make sense of the other answers. I sigh, knowing she’s never heard of the tortoise, the hare, or any of Aesop’s fables. She’s lived in Minnesota all her life, but her parents don’t speak English. The stories she grew up with are “La llorona” and “Los tres consejos.” I look around the computer lab full of Hispanic students and wonder how many questions are reporting that they can’t read when their real obstacle is that they don’t have a white middle class background. It counts against them on standardized tests, in their classes, in the hallways, and at the park; a constant series of ‘ticks’ pointing out that they don’t measure up to what Minnesota expects of them. The next day I will comfort this student, whose reading score will have dropped 15 points because she doesn’t know that the tortoise won the race through persistence. Ironic, considering she’s still persistently trying to pull respectable grades in a community that doesn’t believe she’s capable of academic success.

Hispanic indicates a person from a Spanish speaking background, including Spain and Latin America. Latino indicates a person from Latin America and includes non-Spanish speaking people and countries, such as Brazil. Since my students are all Spanish speaking and one is from Spain, I use the term Hispanic to describe them. Most of the culture I encountered through them is Latino.

“It’s On Me” by **Charley Barniskis** (ISI 2010) was also published in *What Teaching Means: Stories from America’s Classrooms*. Charley describes his essay as a piece that

centers on teacher decision fatigue. I had heard that teachers have to make several thousands of decisions a day. We get worn down by having to decide on so much, so quickly. Chances are that not every one of them is a good one. My story is a composite of my time teaching in Oregon and having to decide about what to do about a student exhibiting signs of abuse. This decision gets complicated because of its context: the chaos of the first five minutes at the start of a high school English class. The ending finds the teacher narrator realizing that maybe his students are just as overwhelmed by the decisions in their own life. It’s a messy ending and felt true.



Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and
like books written in a foreign language.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Other busy writers to check out:

Elizabeth Barniskis (ISI 2010) published a review of a recent book in *Teaching Artist Journal*. The book, *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom*, written by Rick Ayers and William Ayers, discusses the importance of examining race, ethnicity, gender and privilege in the classroom.

See also another article written by Elizabeth that describes her classroom use of on-line role-play to consider issues of racism in Huckleberry Finn. “Huck or Chuck: Using Online Role Play to Negotiate Race” was published in the *Minnesota English Journal* in Spring 2011, and [is available for download](#).



Tanya Miller’s (ISI 2005) personal memoir piece “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” was published in the *Minnesota English Journal* in Spring 2012, and [is available for download](#).

From “The Man to Send Rain Clouds”:

Rain clouds have always seemed depressing to me—that is, until a year of drought. Now, I look for the clouds and hope. I hope that they will not pass us by, that they will give us more than a mere sprinkling, that they will quench the thirst of this parched land.



MWP TCs Provide Glimpse of American Education for International Guests

Muriel Thompson (MWP Director)

Center for Writing, University of Minnesota

As part of our collaboration with the National Center for Writing, located at HiST, Sør-Trøndelag University College in Trondheim, Norway, Cherise Storlie-Kristoffersen (ISI 2010), Synnøve Matre, and Torunn Klemp spent several days visiting us the end of February and beginning of March. The fact that they were able to arrange their visit to coincide with our 2011 ISI Follow-up Retreat provided an opportunity for them to learn about the inquiry study projects that Teacher Consultants (TCs) selected last summer. In addition to this exciting day, several TCs opened their classrooms for us to visit.



Torunn Klemp, Cherise Storlie-Kristoffersen, and Synnøve Matre visit the 2011 ISI retreat

Since our TCs were more than willing to be involved, I had trouble creating an itinerary. How could I choose from so many dynamic teachers? Finally I decided to try to give our visitors a view of both urban and suburban schools at different grade levels within a reasonable traveling range. I asked them how busy they wanted to be and was assured that they were up to a full agenda! So we were off.

Here are some highlights of our three days of school visits:

Day 1

Our journey began very early with a visit to Valley View Middle School in Bloomington. Steph Rollag (ISI 2009) met us with coffee and shared a bit about the 7th grade language arts class she co-teaches with ESL teacher Erin Mohr. Our guests were extremely interested in how the classroom environment was created, including the wall displays used to strengthen instruction.



Erin, Torunn, Synnøve, Steph, and Cherise



Wall display in Rollag and Mohr's classroom

Next we headed to Liz Boeser's (ISI 2007) 12th grade English class at Bloomington Jefferson High School. Liz provided each of us with a laptop and access to the Google documents her students were composing. This is one of her hybrid classes where not all the students are in the classroom at the same time, and we were able to chat with students about this method of instruction.

Our afternoon was devoted to Concord Elementary School (Edina) where Deb Krengel (ISI 2009), Kim Moore (ISI 2010), and Maria Theissen (ISI 2010) teach. Here we were treated to a revision/editing lesson in Kim's 1st grade classroom. Watching writers workshop in action at this grade level was fascinating! Creating an environment that supports such learning was very evident.



Wall display in Kim Moore's classroom



Kim Moore teaching a revision/editing lesson

Day 2

At a brief meeting before the students arrived at Countryside Elementary (Edina), Paul Beverage (ISI 2008), Michelle Shaw (ISI 2008), and Karen Bergman, their principal, shared how influential MWP TCs have been in their school's curriculum planning. Then Principal Bergman took us on a tour of the school, answering questions about the school's daily schedule, student expectations, and demographics. We also observed Michelle's class of combined 3rd-4th graders who were presenting individual projects they had created for their monthly book choices.

Cherise watched a student-teacher conference on writing in Paul's 5th grade class while the rest of us traveled on to Edina High School.

After we visited with Principal Bruce Locklear, who shared his passion for all students excelling at their school, two students arrived to take us on a building tour. Before observing Elizabeth Barniskis' (ISI 2010) American Literature class, we lunched in the writing center. Here we met the writing center coaches and some student tutors. They briefly explained to us about the creation of their writing center and its benefits for all involved—tutors, students, and teachers.

Day 3

We spent this day in St. Paul. Principal Mike Sodomka met us at the door and guided us on a very informative tour of Humboldt Secondary School. Then Theresa Behnke welcomed us to her classroom, where we observed a lesson with her 10th grade class. We quickly became engaged in her interactive poetry lesson.



Theresa Behnke teaches an interactive poetry lesson to her class of 10th graders

Our day ended with a visit to Garlough Environmental Magnet School in West St. Paul.



Cherise, Torunn, and Synnøve display signs of welcome created by Garlough students



Whiteboard in Behnke's classroom which provides students with guidance for effective interactions

No Moss Growing on These Shoes: MWP Teachers Expand Their Professional Horizons

As our students finish the school year and we send them off on their next academic adventure, be it the next grade, college, graduate school or even a new career, we must also take time to congratulate our MWP colleagues who have also continued to pursue new horizons and professional adventures.

Marie Hansen (ISI 2012)

English teacher at Burnsville High School



Marie received the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Affiliate Award for Leadership Development. This honor is awarded to an early career teacher with one to five years of teaching, who has demonstrated “a capacity for professional leadership” and shows promise for the profession. In addition to teaching and directing school plays, Marie has been instrumental in the founding and directing of the Burnsville High School Writing Center, where high school students provide peer mentoring in writing before and after school.

René Montgomery (ISI 2011) & Julie Stauber (ISI 2011)

High school English teachers



René (top photo), who teaches at Cloquet High School, and Julie (bottom photo), who teaches at Proctor High School, have both received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to be among sixteen participants in an NEH Summer Seminar titled “Four Classics: First Novels of Native America.” René and Julie will spend five weeks, July 1– August 4, on the Western Washington University campus in Bellingham, doing in-depth study of four Native American novels. [Click here](#) for more information on how you might attend this seminar in the future.



Susan Perala-Dewey (ISI 2008)

Co-leader of Lake Superior Writing Project satellite

Susan Perala-Dewey has been selected for the University of Minnesota-Duluth Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Public Service. This is a wonderful recognition for all that Susan has done in service to the Duluth community as an instructor of writing. In addition to teaching, Susan has devoted much of her professional effort and time to starting the Lake Superior Writing Project, a satellite site of the Minnesota Writing Project, which will host its third week-long summer institute this July.



Paul Carney (ISI 1992, 1994)

Professor at Minnesota State Community and Technical College

Paul Carney was named Educator of the Year for his excellence in teaching at the post-secondary level. Paul has been teaching English at the Minnesota State Community and Technical College in Fergus Falls since 1988, where he has devoted much attention to literacy learning, especially in terms of writing and assessment. He is also the developer and coordinator of [Ready or Not Writing](#), an online “drop box” to which high school students submit essays to college English instructors for assessment and feedback. Paul was among four MnSCU instructors who received this high honor along with a \$5,000 honorarium.



Announcements & Upcoming Events

Upcoming MWP Workshops

Join Us for the Third Annual Mini Institute (date to be announced)

Due to the success of the past mini institutes, held in late July, we will be offering another summer writing event. Stay tuned to the [MWP News & Events webpage](#) for more details on the date and featured speakers.

David LaRochele to Visit Summer Institute Retreat (June 27th, 2012)

Author David LaRochele will be the guest presenter at this year's retreat for the 22nd Annual Invitational Summer Institute on Wednesday, June 27th, 2012.

LaRochele has written several books for children and young adults, including *Absolutely, Positively Not* and his most recent picture book, *The Best Pet of All*. See [LaRochele's website](#) for more information.



David LaRochele

MWP TCs who want to attend should contact MWP at mwp@umn.edu. Visit the Mt. Olivet website for more information on the site, its trails, services, and directions.

Save the Date:
Fall Workshop—Saturday,
September 29th

Check the [MWP News & Events webpage](#) for updates

Please join us for our sixth annual fall workshop, to be held once again on a Saturday from 9 am to 3 pm. Stay tuned for more details on the theme for this year's workshop.



Wishing you all a relaxing summer.

Photo Credit: Mavroudis Kostas at Flickr

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