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## What a Wonderful Digital World: The National Writing Project Inspires Connections, Writing, and Play

*Stephanie Rollag (ISI 2009)  
University of Minnesota*

### The National Writing Project

While attending the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in Boston, I felt both the familiar comfort of the writing project’s network of dedicated teachers and an excitement for the new ways the Writing Project is making connections between students and teachers in a multimodal world. Throughout the conference I recognized the common writing project practices of teachers learning from each other and teachers engaging in the writing process as a community. The sessions included conversations around inspiring students to take up their voices, exploration of the use of language, collaboration with other dedicated teachers, and opportunities to demonstrate our own vulnerability, joys, and passions around writing. Surrounding these familiar concepts, the framework of the conference focused on how teachers from the National Writing Project are using digital literacies to improve student learning. I walked away feeling refreshed by the energy and stories of caring teachers and eager with possibilities for our own Minnesota Writing Project to grow with the concepts of HOMAGO, *Connected Learning*, and *Digital Is*.



*Stephanie with Linda Christensen at the NWP social hour*

### HOMAGO

The conference’s overall framework was built around the notion of HOMAGO: Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out. I began to understand the meaning of HOMAGO as I attended sessions that

were designed for us to socialize, play, and learn from one another. The sessions designed around the HOMAGO concept used physical spaces, as well as social and new media, to give us an opportunity to learn through play. The notion of HOMAGO emphasizes that when we have opportunities to take risks, make mistakes, and explore, learning occurs. I have always seen the Writing Project as a source of exploration, and these sessions extended that notion to the Internet and other digital resources.

### Connected Learning

I experienced HOMAGO and learned more about *Connected Learning* when I went to a session titled “Make. Hack. Play.” Connected Learning focuses on how we can bring together students’ different life experiences from in and out of school. Specifically, it considers how the digital world can help connect these different spaces. When I attended this session, I was fully thrown into a newly connected world and the idea of “messing around.” The session focused on making webpages, hacking code, and playing with digital literacies. Just as other Writing Project events have emphasized the importance of experiencing processes, I found myself laughing, learning, and meeting new people as I stepped into the unfamiliar territory of hacking code. At the same time, I recognized the potential and possibilities of giving students the power to understand that they can consume the Internet and be the next creators of it.

### Digital Is

One of the things I have always valued about the Writing Project is the emphasis on teachers teaching each other. The Annual Meeting reminded me of how important teachers are to each other and gave me time to explore a digital way for teachers from the Writing Project to learn from each other. *Digital Is* is a website that features the stories of Writing Project teachers. It offers lesson plans, student examples, and news from the National Writing Project. This is a great source to discover ideas to teach writing and a unique platform for teachers to share their stories of teaching writing.



Click on the image to learn more about HOMAGO



Click on the image to go to Connected Learning



Click on the image to go to Digital Is



Stephanie with author Erin Soderberg

### The Minnesota Writing Project

After a weekend of collaborating with other Writing Project teachers from around the country, I was reminded of the importance for us to continue to engage in practices of learning, and eager to imagine how we can continue to grow. The year ahead will provide many opportunities for us to work together as we have in the past. In addition, we will have the chance to explore National Writing Project resources like *Digital Is* and *Connected Learning*. In the spirit of HOMAGO, I'm looking forward to the ways we can hang out, mess around, and geek out together as we consider the changing possibilities for writing in our classrooms.

## Enhancing Professional Growth at the NWP Scoring Conference

Michelle Shaw (ISI 2008)  
Edina Public Schools

When you think about your upcoming vacation days, what do you dream of doing? Perhaps it's spending quality time with your kids. Maybe you are looking forward to getting away for a few days, and then again, it could be your time to rejuvenate. In 2013, my Edina colleague Zach Prowell (ISI 2011) and I were honored to dedicate a few of our vacation days to representing the Minnesota Writing Project at the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) National Scoring Conference in Chicago.

Exactly why were we there? Over 130 educators from 27 states gathered together to score the writing of thousands of students from across the United States. These students were in schools that were partnering with the NWP for the purpose of this research project. All conference attendees were 4th and 5th grade teachers, and we were divided into two groups, based on the grade level we would be assessing.

Sherry Swain, an NWP staff member who was conducting the study, informed us that our purpose was to assess the quality of student writing. One set of papers had been written by the students prior to instruction; they had only been given the prompt. The second set of papers consisted of student writing after they had been given direct instruction of writing skills. Of course, we didn't know which papers fell into which category. It was up to us to assess the writing by looking at our rubrics and samples alone.

If you are looking for a free trip that allows for time to explore on your own, this is not the conference for you. However, if you are excited about connecting with colleagues from around the country and developing your skills as an assessor and instructor of writing, then you will definitely want to seek out this opportunity when it rolls around again.

The majority of our waking hours were devoted to scoring and the recalibration of scoring. We spent a minimum of two hours a day looking at student writing examples together and then applying a holistic score that represented the quality of the piece, in addition to analytic scoring that gave scores in six different areas: content, structure, stance, sentence fluency, diction and conventions. Two people would read each paper and assign these seven scores, based on the rubric and the examples that we had already assessed. The scoring rubric was not up for interpretation, so it was essential for all of us to be on the same page. This is why we had to spend so much time making sure we were assigning reliable scores to the samples we examined together. That way we could be good evaluators when we were given time to do our assigned papers on our own.

*I finally felt like I wasn't alone when it came to the frustrations that often arise when assessing writing.*

As we introduced ourselves that first night, each person shared how many years they had participated in this scoring conference. Some said this was their 5th year. Curious to know how we were chosen to return, I asked my table leader after we were dismissed that evening. "I'm the one who decides who gets asked back from our table. It's all based on how reliable your scores are with the other scorers of your papers." Wow! No pressure there!

So the next morning, I took the task very seriously of making sure my



Michelle (second from right) and Zach (far right) with other educators at the National Scoring Conference in Chicago

scores would be within one number of the next reader's scores. In order to maintain reliability, if the two scorers were more than one score off in any of the seven areas, a third person, our room leader, had to read the paper and determine the score. For example, if I gave a holistic score of 3 out of 6, and the other reader gave it a 5, then our paper would go to our room leader, who would have the last word. Our table leaders kept track of our reliability; if we were giving unreliable scores, the table leader would take us out of the conference room to discuss the problem. And our room leader was not afraid to voice her displeasure when our room reliability was low! Needless to say, this was an intense process.

Zach expressed his thoughts about the process too. "One of the things that really helped were the room conversations about samples," he said. "There were times when large numbers within the room differed on one interpretation of a criterion. Table leaders were a big help with understanding what they were looking for. It was a matter of learning what they were looking for (in abiding by the rubric), and it proved to me that no matter how objective you try to make something, scoring things like writing will always have a level of subjectivity."

As I reflect upon what I took away from this conference, I think about how much professional growth I made in the three-and-a-half days we spent together. I finally felt like I wasn't alone when it came to the frustrations that often arise when assessing writing. Meeting colleagues from around the U.S. who struggle with the same thing has been invaluable. It also made me re-assess my own writing rubrics because I know there is always room for improvement; it all comes down to wanting to help my students become the best writers they can be.

*If you are excited about connecting with colleagues from around the country and developing your skills as an assessor and instructor of writing, you will definitely want to seek out this opportunity when it rolls around again.*

What did Zach take away from the conference that he can utilize in his classroom? "I previously taught 5th grade, and being exposed to the range of 3rd–5th grade writers helped me better understand the scope and sequence of their writing goals and abilities. I also valued the scoring rubric provided by the NWP; it's a great reminder of the skills and strategies in which I can help writers in my classroom grow."

All in all, it was a great experience for both of us. Even though it was a lot of work, I would definitely do it again. So when Muriel sends out that long awaited e-mail about the next SEED Scoring Conference, think about how this opportunity could enhance your own teaching of writing. It's well worth the effort!

### What are our MWP alums up to?

Congratulations to **Erica Schatzlein (ISI 2006)** on her receiving National Board Certification in English as a New Language/Early and Middle Childhood in November 2013.

**Michelle Shaw (ISI 2008)** recently received a State Farm Insurance/YSA Service Learning Grant for Promoting Literacy. Additionally, Michelle's writing group, which started in 2008 and includes **Sean Fleming, Diane Thayer-Peterson, Tom Backen, and Patty Sullivan**, has been meeting monthly for five-and-a-half years!

**Karen Palmen (ISI 2010)** is writing her dissertation and will be Dr. Palmen in May. And if that isn't enough to keep her busy, she's also writing a "bawdy romance novel that highlights the experiences of a curvaceous brown girl and her decisions to participate in an experimental lifestyle."

Send a note about any awards, accolades, or kudos you've received to [mwp@umn.edu](mailto:mwp@umn.edu).

Let us know, too, if you've used your experience with MWP to lead or facilitate workshops, conference sessions, or school-based demonstrations. This information paints a picture of what our TCs have been up to and helps with our yearly reporting to the National Writing Project.

## Staying Connected to MWP Teachers

Ann Thompson, MWP Continuity Director (ISI 2007)

### Join the New MWP Online Book Club!

Last summer at the MWP Breezy Point Writing Retreat for rural teachers, one discussion focused on the need to connect MWP teachers from around the state so that they can share thoughts and ideas. Since traveling during the school year can be challenging, the idea of an online book club was born.

The Minnesota Writing Project now has a new online book club through **Goodreads**. The MWP Book Club is a private group just for MWP Summer Institute participants, although other educators may occasionally be invited, such as the members of our collaborative partner, the Trondheim Writing Project.

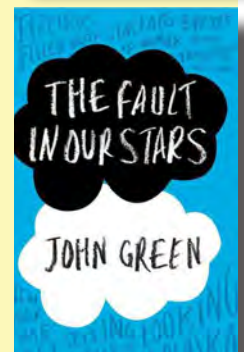
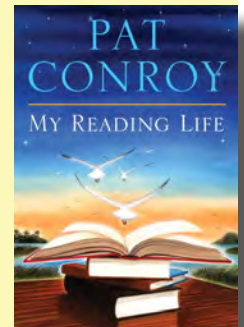
Sometimes the books selected will be geared to the teaching of writing; other times we will be reading young adult novels that we may want to use in our classrooms; and, of course, there will be novels, memoirs, and other books just for fun!

To become a member of the club, first join Goodreads, and then send an email to Debra Hartley ([hartley@umn.edu](mailto:hartley@umn.edu)) telling her that you want to join the MWP Book Club. (Please note that the email address you give Debra has to be the same address you gave Goodreads.)

Marsha Besch, an avid reader and former MWP outreach coordinator, has graciously accepted the role of the online book club discussion leader. She will introduce a new book each season. Our spring book will be *My Reading Life* by Pat Conroy ([click here for information about the book](#)). By Friday, March 21st, Marsha will post a few questions to stimulate our thinking as we read, and online discussion of the book will begin on Monday, April 14th. Club members are encouraged to have read at least half of the book by then.

The next book has already been selected for summer—*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green ([click here for information about book](#)). If you have any questions about or suggestions for the book club, please contact Ann Thompson ([thomp402@umn.edu](mailto:thomp402@umn.edu)) or Debra Hartley ([hartley@umn.edu](mailto:hartley@umn.edu)).

We hope to see you online!



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*If you're interested in a face-to-face opportunity to meet and talk with some of the online book club members, take a look at this information about Spring Writing Day:*

### MWP Spring Writing Day

**Saturday, April 26, 12:30 – 3:30pm 12 Nicholson Hall University of Minnesota**

Finding it hard to make time for your “writing self”? Take advantage of the MWP Spring Writing Day on Saturday, April 26, from 12:30–3:30pm in Nicholson Hall at the University of Minnesota. There will be time both for you to write and share and for your writing group to meet. And if you need a new writing group, you'll have the opportunity to join one that day.

In addition, members of the new online MWP Book Club who can make it into the Twin Cities will have time to meet face-to-face and continue a discussion on the first book, Pat Conroy's *My Reading Life*.

There is no cost to attend this event, but we do need to get a rough idea of how many will be attending, so please RSVP to Ann Thompson ([thomp402@umn.edu](mailto:thomp402@umn.edu)).

## Have you heard about...? (a.k.a. the MWP Tech Report)

*A quarterly column written by Melinda Christianson (ISI 2012), who is continually playing around with technology while she teaches English Language Arts at Underwood Senior High.*

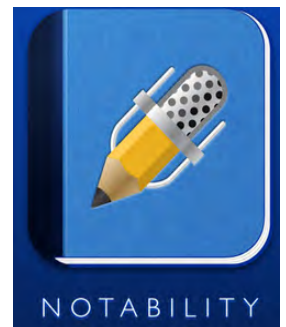
### **SubText (iPad app)**

I am very excited to begin using the SubText iPad app this semester in my concurrent college classes. Choose a book or .pdf to have your students read through SubText. Then create quizzes, discussions, and more, right within the app! You can see what page students are on, and when you are having class discussion, you can turn them all to the correct page quickly. This app takes reading a text to a whole new interactive level.



### **Notability (iPad/iPhone app)**

While there are lots of free writing apps out there, Notability is a great paid option for many reasons. Students can download a .pdf from Schoology, email, or wherever you'd like, and annotate it. At the end of class, the annotated version can be sent to the teacher via the same options—thereby creating a paperless assignment! There are many other features, including sketching, recording lectures, taking photos, and more. It also works with iCloud, Google Drive, and Dropbox. Students can keep multiple "folders" within the app for different subjects or projects. If you are using iPads in your classroom, this is an invaluable app.



### **Socrative (iPad/iPhone app and website)**

Socrative is a free, engaging way to quiz, test, or poll your students on anything. They can use any web-enabled device to complete the given task. For example, you can give a quick question to determine if students understand a concept or are following along. This can also be used as an entrance or exit ticket or to take a pop quiz. There is even a way to create the questions as a game. Finally, entire tests can be given through Socrative, and the results of multiple choice questions are tallied for you. Students at our school have enjoyed using this app.



### **Thinglink (iPad app and website)**

If you are bored with watching endless Power Point presentations, have your students try Thinglink for their next project or presentation. This is a fun way of making images interactive. Students can include audio, video, and text with their images. My sophomores will be creating book talks using Thinglink, and I am looking forward to seeing how they use this presentation tool!





## CI 5410: Writing Process and Thematic Inquiry: Writing for Social Justice

Facilitated by Jessica Dockter Tierney and Stephanie Rollag

### WHO?

Teachers in all

- grade levels
- content areas
- experience levels

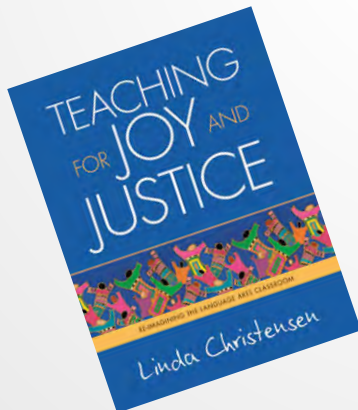
We encourage experienced social justice educators and those new to the theme to join us! Past Invitational Summer and Open Institute participants are welcome, as are both degree and non-degree seeking students.

### WHEN?

Monday-Friday, June 16-20;  
Tuesday, June 24; and Friday, June 27  
9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

### WHERE?

Nicholson Hall  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis East Bank Campus



### WRITING

You will reflect on your own writing processes as you write, share your writing, and participate in a community of writers. Writing groups will meet several times during the week.

### TEACHING

You will consider the theory and practice of writing instruction that helps students achieve their potential as writers and change agents.

### LEARNING

You will examine a current literacy issue related to the course theme: Writing for Social Justice. Course texts include Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* and *Teaching for Joy and Justice*.

Aspects of inquiry might include:

- Exploring the connection between personal and social justice writing
- Taking action through writing
- Examining a variety of genre
- Bringing social justice topics into the writing process
- Assessing social justice writing
- Investigating digital writing options

*"If we intend to create citizens of the world, as most school districts claim in their mission statements, then we need to teach students how to use their knowledge to create change."*

- Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*

For more information on how to register for the Open Institute, contact [mwp@umn.edu](mailto:mwp@umn.edu)

## Writers in Action

Merrily Wolters (ISI 2013)

Lakeaires Elementary, White Bear Lake

“Look carefully. Where are his eyes looking? Do you see where he is pointing?” Third graders focused on the curly-haired gentleman looming large on the Smartboard, who was reading from his iPad, pointing to the text. Then they studied the other two members of the group, who were deep in conversation about whatever text was on their screens. The resulting discussion defined for us “what writers do” during peer writing response groups. Who were we observing? The members of my Summer Institute writing group!



As I stepped out of my comfort zone to participate in my first writing



group last July, I kept thinking of the writing community I was trying to develop in my third grade classroom. I thought photographs might give my students a vision of the engagement necessary to have a productive and enjoyable peer writing experience. Seeing Nicholson Hall might inspire thoughts of college attendance, but I wanted more. I wanted to capture the collaborative personality of a writing group: respecting creativity, developing ideas, and supporting more effective writing. During the last week of the Institute, I asked someone to take a couple of snapshots of our group “in action.” (I remember chuckling at this point. An action shot of writing doesn’t require a quick shutter speed!)

As I established writing routines with my students during the first month of school, I introduced the members of my writing group (two women and two men). The students were intrigued that men could be writers and that teachers worked together on writing. When I shared my published work on the MWP website, then they knew I was a “real” writer.

The photos combined with selected pages from my MWP composition notebook unfolded the entire writing process. In particular, I shared the process that led to my poem, “My Reading



Places,” about my favorite places to read. As I revised

this poem with my writing group last summer, one of the members suggested the poem could become a mentor text for a student writing project. My third graders brought pictures of themselves in their favorite reading places and described these hide-outs following the pattern of my poem. A class of students who indicated they really disliked writing poetry on their fall interest inventory enthusiastically created meaningful, personal poems.

Those poems were the first writing project to be displayed in the hall, a wall of writing which continues to prove our developing community of writers. Last summer I was in the photos, and now I am the photographer—snapping “action shots” of their collaborative work to inspire future classes.

What do writers do when they are working in a writing group?

Talk about other people's writing.  
Authors listen and take notes.  
Pay attention to the work.



## Announcements & Upcoming Events

### MCTE Spring Conference

Thursday & Friday, April 3-4, 2014

Join English teaching colleagues in Duluth, MN, for the 54th Annual MCTE Spring Conference. This year's theme is *What You Do Matters: Connecting with Common Core* and features keynote speakers Ernest Morrell (NCTE President) and Joyce Sutphen (Minnesota Poet Laureate). For more details, [visit the MCTE website](#).

### 2013 ISI Reunion and Spring Writing Day

Saturday, April 26, 2014

TCs from last year's Invitational Summer Institute will gather at the University of Minnesota in the morning to share progress on their action plans and catch up on each other's lives. In the afternoon, all are welcome to join us for a Spring Writing Day! See [page 5](#) for more information.

### 2014 Open Institute—Writing Process & Thematic Inquiry: Writing for Social Justice

June 16-20, 24, & 27, 2014

This summer, Jessica Dockter Tierney (ISI 2012) and Stephanie Rollag (ISI 2009) will once again offer the MWP Open Institute course, *Writing for Social Justice*. The course is open to both degree- and non-degree seeking students. See [page 7](#) for the flyer and contact Jessica ([dock0059@umn.edu](mailto:dock0059@umn.edu)) or Stephanie ([rollo226@umn.edu](mailto:rollo226@umn.edu)) for more information.



### Author Visit—Michael Dahl

June 25, 2014

Michael Dahl, local author of several books for young adults, including the Finnegan's Zwake mystery series, will speak at the 2014 ISI retreat at Mount Olivet Retreat Center in Farmington. Learn more about Michael Dahl [on his website](#) and check the [MWP News and Events webpage](#) for updates and times.

### Fall Workshop

Saturday, October 4, 2014

Please mark your calendar for our 8th Annual Fall Workshop, to be held on Saturday, October 4th. We will welcome Paul Oh, Senior Program Associate at the National Writing Project, who will speak about *Digital Is* and other digital literacy initiatives at NWP. Check the [MWP News and Events webpage](#) for more information.

### Supporting MWP

The Minnesota Writing Project no longer collects individual membership fees. Instead we ask that those interested in supporting our efforts donate to our University of Minnesota Foundation Account (Fund #6464). This shift from membership fees to foundation support makes your gift fully tax deductible. For more information visit our [giving page](#).

## Minnesota Writing Project Advisory Board Members

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### Contributing Writers

Melinda Christianson  
Stephanie Rollag  
Michelle Shaw  
Ann Thompson  
Jessica Dockter Tierney  
Merrily Wolters

### Editing & Layout

Debra Hartley

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