



Spring 2015

Vol. 24 No. 2

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Building Fluency through Authentic Writing

*Erin Mohr (ISI 2012) and Stephanie Rollag (ISI 2009)
University of Minnesota–Twin Cities*

During the 2014–2015 school year, the Minnesota Writing Project partnered with **New Millennium Academy** through a **National Writing Project SEED High-Needs Grant**. New Millennium Academy (NMA) is a charter school in North Minneapolis serving students K–8. The mission at NMA is “to build a better life for our students by creating an environment of high academic achievement while preserving Hmong culture and literacy.” The dual language and literacy needs were at the heart of the work and conversations that the 15 participants and MWP facilitators, Erin Mohr and Steph Rollag, had over 13 sessions, totaling 34 hours between September 2014 and May 2015.

The goals of the project were articulated at the first NMA sessions, in which teachers built a set of norms for their work. At the top of the list was growth for their students and themselves as writers. Teachers articulated the desire to build the writing confidence and fluency of their students, predominantly English Language Learners, while making sure their writing and ideas were understandable. The sessions ultimately used the writing process as the scaffold on which to build both English language skills and the writing confidence of language learners.

Teachers met at monthly PLC meetings and at four MWP Saturday sessions co-sponsored with the Minnesota Department of Education.



*Erin Mohr, Mai Huynh, Steph Rollag, and Paul Oh at the Fall
Workshop on Connected Learning*

Each meeting featured teacher demonstrations by Teacher Consultants and the grant facilitators. Through an end-of-year survey, the teachers described how they benefitted from the idea sharing, discussions and modeling of lessons and how they see a boost in their students' writing fluency and confidence. One teacher wrote, "Going through the actual writing process was a big accomplishment. They loved it."

Building writing confidence does not end with the teacher sessions, however. In May, students will have the opportunity to participate in "Rhinos Write," a themed event planned for the school carnival. Students will respond to a prompt, publish their writing in a public space, and receive a writing prize. In addition, teachers and students who participated in the grant will have their work

published in a class book as a record of their writing accomplishments. Going forward, the dedication and talent of the NMA teachers will allow the group to meet their next goals. Building on their MWP work, the group plans to address needs ranging from incorporating more authentic writing audiences and using technology, to making connections between writing and content areas and creating mini-lessons on grammar and editing.

Throughout this year-long partnership, the NMA teachers' interest in their students' learning was apparent across their reflective processes, their willingness to be vulnerable with their own writing and teaching experiences, and their ongoing focus on student learning. We look forward to the continual connections between NMA and MWP.



Teachers from New Millennium Academy at the MWP Fall Workshop

Bringing Connected Learning to the Classroom

*Lanka Liyanapathirana (ISI 2014)
Woodbury Middle School*

After a few intense weeks immersed in writing, reading and the most useful professional development I've been to, I wanted to take the tools I gained and construct something useful. Most times, the ideas that infiltrate my mind are placed on a "sticky" on my computer and I attend to them like I do my garden: I let the sun paralyze them and the lack of water drown their hopes of survival. But this time I was determined; this time I left MWP inspired with a spark waiting to emblaze my students. So I started to plan and think about what I wanted.

It was simple. All I wanted was the following: I wanted my students to communicate with adults



about meaningful parts of their life and document them. I wanted them to take the information gained and convey it in an authentic way that was both engaging and creative. I wanted them to utilize the language arts standards and skills I was teaching them and embed them into their products. I wanted them to take pride in their work. And lastly, I wanted them to do this biweekly. So maybe I was a bit ambitious... and maybe this was why the abundance of my “stickies” sat on my computer.

Overwhelmed, I was forced to attempt what I wanted because this is what I had chosen for my MWP action plan: to create a Dialogical Journal. Accordingly, I sat down and stared at my computer screen. For what seemed to be hours, I tried to figure out the format of what I was doing, the questions I wanted my students to ask, what skills they should use, how they would convey their knowledge, and how I would assess their learning. This was just the beginning of my process.

A few weeks later, with the journal slowly coming together, I attended a workshop on **Connected Learning**. At first I had no idea what Connected Learning was, but after attending the MWP Fall workshop, the potential of my Dialogical Journal blurred into focus. While trying to keep the elements of Connected Learning in mind—production centered, interest-driven, shared purpose, peer culture oriented, openly networked, and academic—my gears went into overdrive. Paul Oh from the National Writing Project had demonstrated a new way for me to look at Language Arts and provided a way for me to take what I was working on and breathe life into it—I needed to “hack” my journal.

Paul introduced us to the Hacked Notebook. Using copper wire, LED lights, and batteries, we illuminated words and pictures. I was able to use online tutorials to guide my instruction, which allowed me to pace myself as a learner and rewind if I missed something. Having the resources in front of me allowed me to have

time to plan out what I wanted, and it afforded me an opportunity to create one of multiple variations. But I didn’t know if I would be able to do this with my students. At least not the way he did. So, I continued to think about what I could do, and eventually my product evolved into the Dialogical Journal: Hacked.

In order to do this, I looked for more hands-on ways that students were able to take their information from questions like “What world event had the most impact on you?” and “What was your best or worst experience in elementary or middle school?” and transform them into pieces of art. We made comics and infographics, wrote poems, and created collages. By attending this workshop, I took the idea of a Hacked Notebook and transformed it to what I needed it to be.

This has been a learning process, and in no way has my journal sailed along without meeting some giant waves. There have been many waves, sharks, and even icebergs. I am still in my trial and error stage, and will be for a few more years, continually trying to make it better. But as I continue to develop this journal, the ideas of Connected Learning hover throughout my thought process and guide my intentions.



A hacked notebook

Assignments Matter: Teacher Jam Sessions

René Montgomery (ISI 2011)

Cloquet High School

I love a good jam. Home-canned raspberry is my favorite. I love it on top of peanut butter and a hot toasted English muffin. My mouth delights in the sweet and salty contrasts that melt together from the heat of the toasted muffin and seep into the air pockets of the bread. I also love listening to a good music jam session. I am always amazed at the way a haphazard group of musicians can come together to blend their sounds and create something new and beautiful.

Increasingly, I am valuing and loving time that teachers spend in their own “Jam Sessions.” A room full of teachers given time to problem-solve, generate ideas, and share processes and best practices with each other creates energy and excitement. Amazing things happen when teachers collaborate, blend together, create together, and fill the air pockets of education.

Assignments Matter is a National Writing Project (NWP) initiative, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Minnesota Writing Project (MWP), along with nineteen other writing project sites, was selected to train a liaison and host teacher jam sessions targeting quality text-based writing assignments.

As the MWP Assignments Matter liaison, I attended the 2014 NWP Fall Conference last November to participate in a training session with Assignments Matter liaisons from across the country. We spent a full day learning about two tools from the [Literacy Design Collaborative \(LDC\)](#) that teachers can use to make more meaningful text-based writing assignments. We also joined together in a [g+ community on Google](#) focused on teachers working together to make assignments that matter and to collect examples of meaningful and relevant writing tasks.

On January 24, 2015, a small group of teachers attended a Saturday workshop in Cloquet where I presented the two LDC tools—a task template and a jurying rubric for writing assignments. Teachers worked to design text-based writing tasks (assign-

ments) using the template, which is designed to align writing tasks with the Common Core Standards. Then they worked together through the jurying rubric, which helps teachers make a careful and thorough examination of the assignment before putting it in the hands of students. Most important, the workshop provided time for teachers to collaborate, write, rework, and share. Participants felt this workshop helped them understand the purpose of individual writing tasks and that the tools helped guide them into creating tasks that are more relevant to their students and the texts they have read. [Click here for a live stream discussion](#) between participants and NWP leaders.

In March, I attended an Assignments Matter Liaison Debriefing meeting in conjunction with the NWP Annual Spring Meeting. At the debriefing, we reflected on our experiences from January 24 and looked at how to revise and adapt the training to make the experience even better. We even brought in three local students to “Shark Tank” some of the writing tasks created during the January 24 workshop day. These three students listened to the writing tasks, asked questions to clarify them, and offered their insight and thoughts on the work. It was amazing to hear students reflect on the assignments we ask them to do.

On Wednesday, August 5, I will offer a second Assignments Matter training at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Participation in the training is free, but limited to 25 middle school and high school teachers. The workshop is valuable for all content areas and is designed to work with text-based writing assignments—assignments in which students have read at least one text and need to use evidence from it to support their writing. Participating teachers need to bring a text-based writing assignment and a laptop. We will work together as a “Task Jam” to prepare these assignments using the template and the jurying rubric. Participants will also be invited to join the Assignments Matter g+ community. See the [flyer on the next page](#) for registration information.





Assignments Matter Workshop

Wednesday, August 5, 2015; 9 am to 3 pm
135 Nicholson Hall (U of M)

Sponsored by the National Writing Project, the Minnesota Writing Project, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Limited to 25 middle school or high school teachers
Free workshop Registration required

The Assignments Matter Training is for middle school and high school teachers of all content areas that work with literacy and the Literacy State and Common Core Standards.

- Learn about a Writing Assignment Template designed to help teachers create more meaningful writing assignments and ensure alignment with the Common Core Standards
- Try a Peer Jurying tool to validate writing assignments before using them with students
- Join a community of teachers working and learning together
- Use social media to connect with other training sites on that day

AS AN ADDED BONUS, each participant will:

- Earn CEU credits.
- Get a free lunch!
- Have an opportunity to become involved with a community of teachers working together to improve education and student writing. Together we work smarter and stronger!

“We learned a succinct, clear method to analyze writing assignments and change them to make them more effective and aligned to standards. In one day, I feel more confident and aware of what I am assigning students and WHY I am assigning it. Great workshop!”

Registration is limited to the first 25 teachers.

To register: email mwp@umn.edu

Registration deadline is July 24, 2015.

More information will be sent to registered participants before the training.

Questions can be directed to mwp@umn.edu

Minnesota Writing Project Offers an Open Institute

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

3 Credits

Facilitated by Jessica Dockter Tierney and Stephanie Rollag



WHO?

Teachers in all

- Grade levels
- Content areas
- Experience levels

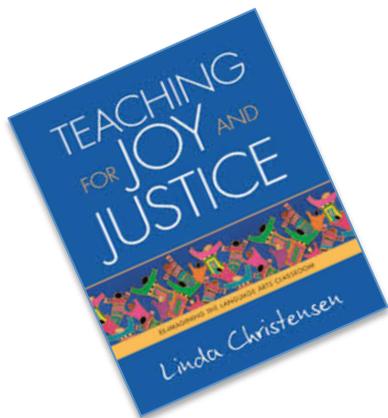
We encourage experienced social justice educators and those new to the theme to join us! Past Invitational Summer and Open Institute participants are welcome, as are both degree and non-degree seeking students.

WHEN?

Monday-Friday, June 15-19;
Tuesday, June 23; and Friday, June 26
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 genres
- 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

2015 NWP Spring Meeting: A Time for Dialogue between Teachers and Government

Muriel Thompson

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Traveling to DC for the annual NWP Spring Conference is usually a welcome break from Minnesota winter. However, this year Kirsten and I encountered very windy, chilly weather and no sight of beautiful cherry blossoms. The unpleasant weather, however, was offset by meeting teacher consultants (TCs) from many states who expressed their excitement about coming to Minneapolis this November for the NWP/NCTE Fall Conference.

Anticipation filled the air as 100+ TCs from 32 states gathered in the Capitol Visitor Center the morning of Thursday, March 26th. NWP Executive Director Elyse Eidman-Aadahl warmly welcomed us, reminding us of the importance of sharing our stories about the value of NWP during our congressional visits. In addition, we were inspired by Representative John Yarmuth (Kentucky's 3rd District) and Senator Thad Cochran (Mississippi), who stopped by to greet our group and to share their commitment to supporting teachers.

Yarmuth, a prize-winning journalist, emphasized the importance of writing and critical thinking, as jobs in the future continue to change but will always require strong literacy skills. He shared that when only 35% of the population votes, we need to strengthen the public's understanding of how important government is to the people.

Cochran, a long-time supporter of the National Writing Project, received a standing ovation. He was one of the sponsors of the original bill in 1990 to secure federal funding for NWP.

Then our marathon day of visiting all ten congressional offices began! Usually our visits are with legislative assistants; however, Representative Rick Nolan (Minnesota's 8th district) took time to meet us personally because René Montgomery (ISI 2011), who lives in his district, was able to join us this year. In each of our visits, we stressed the importance of continued federal funding to support quality professional development. We learned about the possible reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and increased concerns over excessive testing.

At our visit to Senator Amy Klobuchar's office, Karen Taylor, from the Red River Valley Writing Project located at Fargo, helped us tell about the importance of our collaboration with North Dakota. Minnesota teachers living in the border areas gain some services from their site too. North Dakota provides some state funding for their NWP sites—making us wonder if it's time for us to investigate that possibility in Minnesota.

Exhausted, we finally completed our visits around 6 p.m.; however, we heard that the Senate stayed in session until 4 a.m. the following morning to vote on budget bills before the spring recess.

Friday and Saturday were filled with specific NWP workshops. Friday morning, Kirsten and I listened to three educators who have fellowships to work at the U.S. Department of Education. They shared examples of policy changes that are occurring because of teacher input—especially around the burdensome testing schedule. Check out teachtolad.org to learn about opportunities for submitting your ideas and applying for future teacher fellowships.

Friday afternoon was an opportunity for us to gain information about an important NWP initiative: the College-Ready Writers Program. Several NWP sites have been involved in creating materials for practices in argument writing. We plan to investigate this program more thoroughly and consider offering a future Advanced Institute.

On Saturday while René participated in a full day workshop for Assignments Matter (see her ar-



Congressman Rick Nolan and René Montgomery

ticle on [page 4](#)), Kirsten and I fought the cold and wind to visit the Civil Rights and Rosa Parks exhibits at the Library of Congress. We also enjoyed seeing the expanded exhibits at the American Indian Museum, including one on the Dakota–U.S. War of 1862 in Minnesota. It’s worth your time to investigate their great online resources for teachers: [Library of Congress](#) and [National Museum of the American Indian](#).

Finding My Muse in NOLA

by Michelle Shaw (ISI 2008)

Sit back, relax, and absorb the sights and sounds in the heart of the French Quarter as you peer over the front porch of the Le Richelieu Hotel. To your left, you see Jackson Square just a few blocks down Chartres Street, where local artists await your patronage. If you move right up to the railing, you just might be able to see a cornerstone of Saint Louis Cathedral, and you’ll surely hear the church bells clang every hour. Then there’s [Muriel’s](#), a restaurant the locals believe is still haunted by several ghosts. In fact, you can go upstairs to sit on the chaise sofa in the Séance Lounge, and feel it for yourself.

Now turn to your right. You’re just a couple of blocks away from the section of town where New Orleans musicians play well into the night, both inside the numerous jazz clubs lining Frenchmen Street and on every street corner. People are dancing and clapping along to the rhythm, each instrument taking its turn to shine. The French Market is just as close. Can you smell the aromas of traditional Cajun cooking and fresh-brewed coffee from Café Du Monde wafting down the street? With Steamboat Natchez cruising down the Mississippi River on the other side of the market, you are exactly where you are meant to be.

Last year at the New Orleans Writing Marathon, sponsored by the [Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project](#) (SLWP), I experienced all of this and more. 2014 was the first year they had opened the marathon up to writing projects across the nation. So instead of the eighteen local participants who usually attend, they were delightfully surprised to have fifty of us arrive from all over the United States. It was a big change for the organizers, but one they were truly energized by. For those of you familiar with Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*, which I was introduced to during the Summer Institute of 2008, the format of the marathon is largely based on the system Goldberg describes.

Each morning we’d gather together to spend an hour with author Kim Stafford, son of poet William Stafford, who facilitated workshops on finding our muses. Afterwards, we broke up into groups of four and discussed where to begin, initially relying on ideas from the local SLWP Teaching Consultant who would be facilitating our journey that day: a coffee house, a bar (Yep, even at 9:30 in the morning! After all, this is New Orleans), a park.... Our task for the marathon was to find our muse in New Orleans, our inspiration. We’d do this by choosing a place to go, settle in, write for 12-15 minutes, share our writing aloud in a read around, socialize and dine with one another, and finally allow our feet to guide us to a new location.

We soon learned that being writers was our ticket for getting into venues we normally wouldn’t have access to. In fact, word quickly spread throughout the French Quarter that there were writers in town. For me, that meant having the opportunity to write in the performance room of [WVOZ, the Sound of New Orleans](#) radio station where all my favorite musicians had once performed.



A music-filled evening with fellow participants, Richard Louth, and author Bev Marshall

Wink's Bakery and Bistro was another highlight. As soon as **Mr. Henry** saw our notebooks tumble out of our bags, the bakery owner and star of the movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild* immediately sat down and introduced himself. The next hour was a real treat as we listened to his life stories. Because there were so many inspiring people to meet along the way, it was a gift to be able to let every day unfold naturally.

As each venue had a life of its own, I discovered different voices materializing through my pen. Rarely did I continue working on something I had already started when we moved to a new destination, and I quickly found myself exploring genres I'd never attempted before: mystery, historical fiction, and screen plays. There was no limit to what we would write and where we could write, and we were encouraged by fellow participants to share our organic material during the voluntary read around when we gathered for our large group sharing session each night. Not only was it a time to socialize and listen to one another's pieces, but we were also treated to a multitude of refreshments you will only find in The Crescent City.

Richard Louth, the mastermind behind the NOLA writing marathon, began the evening sessions either with a piece of his own writing or that of one of the great authors who found their own muses in New Orleans at one time or another: William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Ernest Hemingway.... Sharing our raw stories with colleagues from all over the country was very powerful. Just speaking the words written down on the page of my notebook was an emotional experience, and to hear the amazing pieces others had created in merely 15 minutes without revising was just as incredible. Since we were all inspired by different places throughout the city and the people we met, our various muses affected each piece of writing in wondrous ways.

While this writer had to determine a way to take part while managing her disability, I highly recommend this experience. Not only do you grow as a writer and experience the process in a way you never dreamt possible (one that can easily be carried out no matter where you live, not to mention integrated into the way you write with your students), you also meet amazing people who become lifelong friends as they return to the marathon year after year.

If you are worried about finances, don't be. You can share the \$100 per night hotel room with another, use your frequent flyer points or carpool, and write off your nominal registration fee and other expenses as education-related since you do earn CEUs for your participation. Speaking from experience, it is worth every minute.

If you are interested in this incredible opportunity, visit www.writingmarathon.com. You can also check out the **NOWM Facebook page**, where you are strongly encouraged to participate from the comfort of your own home during the writing marathon in July if you aren't able to attend in person.



Half of my elated writing group after we'd finished writing at the radio station



Another memorable day of writing with Dwight Henry at Wink's Bakery

Enter Pedagogy and a Pint

Robyn Dettling Madson

Forest Lake High School (ISI 2014)

Teaching can be a lonely job. Sure, we interact with people almost all day, but in a role where we make decisions, give directions, advise, coach, and generally lead. When we do spend time with other teachers, it is under the guise of “professional development”—typically a top-down, passive listening environment that gives rise to groans and games of jargon bingo. On the rare occasion there is conversation, teachers typically spend time within their own departments, in their own teams, or with teachers from the same school and same discipline as their own. Outside of school, happy hours turn into complaint sessions. There are few spaces to engage in cross-disciplinary, cross-grade, and interdistrict conversations about our profession in a philosophical or practical way. Enter Pedagogy and a Pint.

Pedagogy and a Pint germinated from the action plan requirement in the MWP Invitational Summer Institute last summer. I was at a loss for what to do, partially because I wasn’t sure what the school year had in store for me, but also because I don’t usually plan ahead. Still, the institute had opened a lot of doors in my mind, and I couldn’t shake the idea that the best professional development I’ve ever had sprung from the spontaneous discussions between colleagues. I have learned more from my teacher friends outside of school and organized activities, whether it be at lunch during a College in the Schools workshop, dinner with teacher friends, or hanging out with Summer Institute colleagues. What’s more, those connections are invaluable because it helps me remember I’m not alone.

Pedagogy and a Pint meets one Friday a month at Common Roots Cafe in Minneapolis. A wide variety of teaching professionals come from around the metro and beyond: Art, Writing, Social Studies, Physical Education, English, ELL, elementary, middle, high school and college teachers meeting, usually with one or more central themes, but certainly with no expectations aside from connecting and discussing both the joys and hardships of our common vocation. The group has spread onto the Internet in the form of a Facebook group: **Pedagogy and a Pint Super Teacher Team**. My goal has been to bring teachers together and share our stories, ideas, and philosophies, and thus far it’s been successful.

Our next meeting is tentatively set for May 15th at 6 p.m. at **Common Roots**, and newcomers are welcome. If an online connection is a better fit, look us up and join the Facebook group.

Announcements & Upcoming Events

New Continuity Director

Katie Belanger (**Benilde-St. Margaret's School**, ISI 2012) is our new continuity program leader, taking over from Ann Thompson. She will promote on-going connections between Teacher Consultants and the Minnesota Writing Project. Katie looks forward to the challenge!



Holocaust Educator seminar

Merry Davin (ISI 2013) has been selected to attend the Holocaust Educators Network summer seminar in New York in preparation for a satellite seminar in Minnesota for 2017. Merry is the literacy coach for the **American Indian Magnet School** in St. Paul. She is extremely excited about the possibility of a future seminar here!



Teacher of the Year finalists

Congratulations to MWP TCs Mindy Christianson (**Underwood High School**, ISI 2012) and Lanka Liyanapathirana (**Woodbury Middle School**, ISI 2014), finalists for Minnesota Teacher of the Year!



SAVE THE DATES

The National Writing Project Annual Meeting

Thursday, November 19
Minneapolis, Minnesota



The 2015 National Writing Project Annual Meeting will take place at the Hilton Minneapolis in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. NWP's 2015 Annual Meeting will be held in conjunction with the NCTE Annual Convention.



Responsibility, Creativity, and the Arts of Language

November 19-22, 2015, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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2014-2015

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Minnesota Writing Project Newsletter

Published by the Center for Writing

University of Minnesota

10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Dr. SE

Minneapolis, MN 55455

An Official Site of the National Writing Project

also funded by

the Center for Writing

and the College of Liberal Arts

at the University of Minnesota

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