

The Minnesota Writing Project



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Greetings from the Editor

In the wake of losing all federal funding for MWP, it is exciting to report how busy we've been this year and all of the great plans we have for next year. As we maintain long-term school partnerships, create new programming for youth, and continue to develop meaningful professional development for educators, we are looking forward to building on the strong history MWP has had for over two decades. This has required both creative thinking from our leadership and network of Teacher Consultants and generous support in a variety of forms. We invite you to take a look at what's been going on and what we're planning. And we invite you to think about how you might join us in our work in the coming year. We would love to hear from you mwp@umn.edu as we continue our commitment to leverage the knowledge and expertise of MN educators in order to improve literacy for all learners. Together, we can do this!

Columbia Academy Awarded Grant to Implement C3WP

By Alison Humpal
Columbia Heights School District

Every day, I turn on the news and learn of another school shooting or act of violence. A Black man wrongfully accused, or worse, murdered simply because he is Black. There are reports of local ICE raids, talk of a wall, the refusal of refugees. And then I walk into my classroom and see a group of children who do not look like me, to whom these headlines are more than news; it is their frightening reality. Teaching in a diverse urban setting, I find that my kids are acutely aware of what is going on in the world. And they have questions, fears, and opinions about these issues. Some educators shy away from these conversations, but I embrace them. I feel that our silence speaks volumes. On a personal level, it harms the sense of safety and belonging that is imperative for our students to learn. On a far larger scale, it threatens to yield a generation of ignorance that cannot be afforded. As we look to the future, it is vital to include many voices in our discourse.

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Responding to this “contemporary call for respectful argumentative discourse,” the National Writing Project developed the “College, Career, and Community Writers Program” (C3WP). The program first came to the Minnesota Writing Project through a grant that allowed a cohort of Writing Project teachers to complete an advanced institute during the current school year. Led by Erin Mohr and Stephanie Rollag Yoon, this small group of teachers has spent the year immersing themselves in the materials provided by C3WP, implementing lessons in their classrooms, and completing writing data cycles to monitor student progress. As the initial year of implementation wraps up, the process of building and sharing out these resources in our MWP network begins.

Next school year, the Minnesota Writing Project will be working with the English Language Arts and English Language Learner teachers at Columbia Academy, the middle school of Columbia Heights Public Schools. Our district is an extremely diverse community tucked directly northeast of Minneapolis. With a high needs population, Columbia Heights met the criteria set forth by the National Writing Project to receive a grant for the implementation of C3WP. Additionally, Columbia Heights has a history of utilizing MWP for professional development, and I went through the advanced institute this past school year, applying C3WP in my 8th grade English classroom. We look forward to integrating argument writing into our curriculum, creating space for our students to respectfully debate and write about the things that matter most to them!

In our current world, the ability to engage in civil discourse is more important than ever. In education, we spend a lot of time talking about the skills necessary for students to be “college and career ready,” which includes the skill of clear and effective communication. But even more fundamental is the ability to engage in discourse as members of a community. The abilities to read critically, open one’s mind to multiple perspectives, and respectfully articulate one’s opinion are essential skills for the citizens of a democracy. As future parents, neighbors, friends, and citizens, our students have a crucial need to learn how to communicate a stance appropriately and respectfully. The College, Career, and Community Writing Program provides a framework to prepare our students for these critical conversations, evaluation of evidence, and developing a well-supported stance.

Reflections on Year 1 with College, Career, and Community Writers Program

By Jess Emery

Henry Sibley High School

When I agreed to participate in this year-long, 12-member cohort of teachers, I wasn't quite sure what I'd agreed to. Would it be as amazing as it sounded (students' argument writing expanding to encompass effective techniques and multiple perspectives! Resources adaptable to my classroom needs! A supportive community of writing educators!)? Or would it end up being just one more thing on my already-full plate?

Of course, the April perspective on my participation in C3WP didn't quite match up with the rose-colored vision I'd had in September. There were times that even fitting one "extra" thing into the flow of my curriculum seemed like too much, even if it was just a short writing assessment. Overall, though, I can honestly say that the things I gained by participating—camaraderie, resources, accountability to a group effort, and inspiration to refocus my writing instruction—were absolutely worth the extra commitment.

In the spirit of what I've been asking my students to do this year during our C3WP "writing cycles"—brevity, focus, and clear intent in their argument writing—here are a few of my essential takeaways from C3WP:

1. Teaching argument writing is hard. We already know this instinctively as teachers, especially at the secondary level. Which is why, I think, much of the argument or opinion writing curriculum I've come across in my career tends toward an over-simplified, template-based format. The C3WP curriculum and resources challenge teachers and students to craft arguments that reach beyond a "pro-con" framework. Instead, they coach us in writing an effective argument based on multiple perspectives. This is a difficult task, and C3WP provided a doable jumping-off point.

2. Dialogue with colleagues—outside of the school setting—is priceless. There's something magical that happens when a group of curious educators who don't work in the same school together are thrown together to unite on a common curricular front. While we stayed generally focused on the tasks at hand during our face-to-face Saturday meetings, there was a good amount of satisfying, refreshing, and challenging conversation that developed organically and—I'm certain others felt the same—renewed our sense of purpose as teachers of writing.

3. Adding even small things into current teaching practice can have a big impact. When I initially went through the resources provided by C3WP, it seemed overwhelming. This was an entire course in itself! In true MWP style, though, there was never undue pressure to make my curriculum fit the C3WP scope and sequence; the opposite, in fact. So when I chose a few deliberate things to integrate into my classroom, I felt able to really see their impact and use that as valid data in our group assessments. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be part of this work, whatever it ends up looking like in my classroom in the coming year.

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2018 Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards

By Lee Fisher

MWP Graduate Assistant &

Minnesota Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards Coordinator

On a sunny Saturday morning in May, a little more than 80 students in 7–12th grade, their families, and their teachers gathered at the Ramsey County Library in Roseville, MN to honor the tremendous work of young MN writers. The 2017 Midwest National Poet Ben Lee described his year as an ambassador for the art and craft of writing, speaking at events across the country hosted by Scholastic. And for over 20 minutes, students from across the metro area came to the front of the gathering and spoke their name, the genres of writing they work in, and the awards earned and then heard a room full of their peers and community stakeholders applaud their work. I looked around the room and saw pride from those gathered around the act of writing, and it was moving.

The 2018 Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards saw an increase in participation from students and schools. We also saw an increase in the number of judges who graciously volunteered their time to read youth writing as well as the number of families and students coming to celebrate the awards. We look forward to continuing this growth for next year! We at MWP have big ideas for people we'd like to invite to participate in this rewarding experience at all parts of the process. But we also want to reach out and encourage you, our MWP network of teachers, to participate next year. Reach out and ask us how if you're not sure what the steps are and we would love to assist you. If there's one thing that we took away from the awards ceremony this year, it was how meaningful participating in the competition was for those who gathered at the ceremony on that Saturday morning. The students and their adults came dressed up, took pictures, and shook hands with me, MWP Director Steph Rollag Yoon, and Center for Writing Director Kirsten Jamsen. They were proud to be recognized as writers. And they stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers, united in feeling the power of their work and identities as writers.



Photos from top to bottom: Tre Warner and his teacher Frank Eustis are introduced by MWP Director Steph Rollag Yoon to 2017 National Poet Ben Lee; a parent records his student accepting an award; teacher Frank Eustis, student Anushka Srivastava, and her mom pose for a picture.

MWP Youth Camps' Inaugural Year

By Jacob Julian
Valley View Middle School

Millennials. Gen X. Baby Boomers. Whatever your generation was called, think of the derogatory stereotypes around the name. For me, an aging Millennial, I've read that we can't cook, work, clean, or save. Fortunately for me and my friends, we are finding our places in the world and are speaking our voices ever louder with each growing year, but this is not true of everyone I know.

I teach seventh grade on the east side of Bloomington, and I'm watching the new generation coming of age with literal and figurative targets on their chests. Since February, I've spent whole class periods with them discussing all the horrid names they hear in the news and from adults tasked with protecting them at home, at school, and in their communities. They are powerfully aware of how people in the world around them are defining all aspects of their lives, and this is where the heart of our job as educators can thrive. In Bloomington and across the state, my colleagues and I are helping these young people find their voices to better position themselves in the world.

This summer the Minnesota Writing Project is producing Summer Youth Camps like many of our sister organizations in the National Writing Project. We are intent on creating spaces for students in grades 5–8 from across the Twin Cities to learn and experiment with skills they have been practicing in and out of classes throughout their lives. In the Summer Youth Camps on the University of Minnesota campus, students will sharpen their knowledge of the language they use to define who they are in a world that tries to oppress them at every turn.

Last year, my aunt said sometimes I take myself too seriously. After reading the above paragraphs, I understand what she means. I'm going to teach classes on reading and writing graphic novels this summer, and I honestly ask myself, "How can a graphic novel can topple pillars of hate?"

When I catch myself doubting what we do, I remember Congressman John Lewis saying that he and many other Civil Rights icons began their training with a comic book authored by Martin Luther King. There is great power in our words and how we speak to the world. Our students know if they can't or aren't able tell their stories, others will.

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News & Upcoming Events

National search for our next MWP Director begins soon!

We will soon begin our national search for the next MWP Director, who will have the opportunity to build on the legacy of previous Directors Steph Rollag Yoon, Muriel Thompson, and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles. The Director is responsible for MWP's vision and goals, program development and assessment, and stewardship of resources to fulfill MWP's mission. Once this position is open for applications, it will be announced on mwp.umn.edu and shared via the MWP email list. Please help us spread the word and contact MWP Interim Director Kirsten Jamsen (kjamsen@umn.edu, 612.625.5355) if you would like more information or to be involved in the search process.

2019 Scholastic Writing Awards

Check out the MWP website for information coming this fall about the 2019 Scholastic Writing Awards. Registration opens September 12, 2018. Contact Lee Fisher at fishe330@umn.edu with any questions.

Save the Date! MWP Fall Workshop: Argument Writing and C3WP

Join us on Saturday, October 27, 2018 to explore argument writing the National Writing Project's C3WP (College, Career, & Community Writers Program). We know that there is rarely an issue that has just two sides. However, this simplification of complex ideas is pervasive in current discourse and leads to divisiveness, weakens critical thinking, and devalues multiple perspectives. Hear from practicing K-12 teachers who are utilizing C3WP's resources to augment their own curriculum in ways that respond to students' learning needs. This is not a pre-packaged scripted curriculum. Instead, C3WP features great resources from the National Writing Project that work to support teachers as they help their students develop critical perspectives that welcome multiple viewpoints and, ultimately, take a stand.

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