



Minnesota Writing Project

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Overview of NWP Annual Meeting: “I’m here, and I’m still writing.”



Any viewer of photographs taken at the NWP Annual Meeting, which ran concurrently with NCTE’s Annual Convention, immediately notices the brightness of the teacher consultant-participants’ eyes (see picture), the enthusiasm animating conversation, the focused concentration of listeners at conference sessions that signals that they are diligently contemplating how to bring back those strategies to their own classrooms.

The primary reason behind the excitement that animated the event – beyond the camaraderie and the exchange of ideas – is the palpable climate of change surrounding our national education system and the evolution of the teaching of writing according to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Teachers are aware that a “one size fits all” approach can be a disservice to many students, that students learn and approach writing in a myriad ways. A profound desire to enable students to be their academic and personal best underlies this ethos, which is evident given NWP teacher consultants and NWP leaderships’ call to action to prepare students well for the impending introduction of an essay portion to the Scholastic Achievement Test. Richard Sterling, NWP Executive Director, declared in his opening address that NWP is becoming increasingly visible due to the College Board’s recent “formation of a National Commission on Writing in preparation for a writing component on the SAT” (p. 10). Sterling is a member of the advisory board to the commission.



The writers of NWP’s newsletter *The Voice* calculated that a single conference attendee would be able to attend a maximum of six sessions/workshops each day, which made choosing from the extensive variety of sessions a challenging decision. To provide a snapshot of what attending the meeting was like, we asked Bev Alsleben (MWP TC 2000) and Deb Kruse-Field (MWP TC 2000) to serve as our “roving correspondents” and report on some of their favorite sessions. Bev attended a social action workshop in which participants were separated into breakout groups to learn cooperatively the principles of social action. Participants discussed how to incorporate the principles into lesson plans and activities, and then learned how to use tools/graphics that could facilitate students’ processes of inquiry. Bev also felt that a session entitled “Writing ‘Where You Live’ – Researching and Shaping Community” was memorable and is relevant to all students’ lives. Bev described the featured project as a vehicle for allowing students to construct meaning around their own community, to challenge themselves to see their world more vividly: “Some [students] used photos to research their communities, others used social action processes to address needs. For example, one school set out to collect oral histories but ended up saving a historic building by partnering with the historical society. Another group wrote about their community and a third group also wrote a manual for a museum guide – great ideas for social action, writing (publication) and using literature to support a theme.”

The most notable workshop in Deb’s review, an NCTE session entitled “Bringing Voice and Creativity to Writing about Education,” dealt with teacher professional development, and included a panel discussion of several editors from NCTE journals, teachers, and professional writers. The crux of the presentation is that teaching is a complex profession that is “invigorating, frustrating, and entertaining,” yet published writing by teachers is often devoid of “the true grit that makes a school community so exciting.” The panel provided detailed examples of their planning and writing styles, and suggested that teacher-writers offer practical suggestions, write with a new angle, ask tough questions, and balance serious issues with humor when writing about education. Later, Sarah Desson and Randy Powell collaborated as part of a presentation in the NCTE Author Strand, and reinforced the themes addressed in the previously mentioned session; they declared that teaching and writing take lots of creativity and energy, and that it is difficult to attend to both. They suggest jotting down a line or two at random moments about what truly matters – because writing takes place subconsciously when one is not sitting at the computer. Most of writing is learned simply by practicing. -Erin Harley, MWP Research Assistant

Annual Review Report

Sixty degree temperatures, warm sunshine, and the smell of jasmine greeted me as I stepped onto the campus – a nice contrast to frigid Minnesota. I was one of 45 reviewers invited by NWP to read annual site reports at the Annual Review, held February 7-9 at the Faculty Club on the University of California-Berkeley campus. Over the course of two days, we reviewed at least 168 proposals. The process not only ensures that sites are healthy and building their capacity while they follow the NWP model, but provides an excellent professional development opportunity for reviewers, who are site leaders themselves. Participants at my table included directors from California, Louisiana, and Mississippi; we each reviewed four sites. The experience is extremely beneficial, and mirrors the collaborative reading-writing-revision process that is central to the mission of the National Writing Project. As we are reading about another site's programs and activities, we are constantly thinking about our own, musing "what can our site do better? Can our site try that?" and keeping the needs of our respective states/regions in the forefront of our minds.

At the end of each day, we took in some of the ambience of the area – walking the campus, observing the protesters, dining at local restaurants. Diane Scollay (Gateway Writing Project in St. Louis, Missouri, and my roommate), and I took advantage of the beautiful weather Sunday afternoon to ride BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) to San Francisco. It took a *little* convincing when I realized that for part of the ride the train would be traveling under water in the Bay to get from Berkeley to San Francisco. I thoroughly enjoyed our walk along the waterfront and dinner at the pier, especially when I called my daughter to learn that it had been -20° WC that morning in the Cities.

Bev Alsleben (2000 MWP Fellow), now in her 3rd year of participating on the NWP ELL Advisory Leadership Team, also attended the Review. She was involved in reviewing ELL state proposals. Of 19 proposals, 5 were funded. The members of the Team read, scored, and discussed all proposals by listserv before Berkeley. Extensive collaborating with other networks about selection and reading about the sites took place. Then the team met to discuss the proposals, agree on the recipients, and write the award letters. Bev feels that the involvement is "helping us [Minnesota] to feel connected to a network of people around the country who are experiencing the same things and bring a lot of insights into solving and dealing with issues." For Bev, being involved with this NWP network has "opened up a world that I didn't know too much about before. I have gained an awareness of the importance of classroom research and using research to implement things in my classroom. It has definitely given me a lot more confidence. I've been able to learn that I'm not unique in what I know and what I think."

About our experience of being involved with NWP, I echo Bev's comment: "Personally – it's kind of like family. You begin to realize that world is really a small place. You have a lot in common and a lot to learn from each other. You begin to appreciate one another for what each person brings. It's nice to be in a place where you're accepted for being a teacher, one that assumes that you have a lot to offer." *-Muriel Thompson, MWP Co-Director*



Micki St. Sauver leads a workshop session in St. Paul.

Providing Intensive Learning, Support for Teachers – St. Paul Initiative

MWP is at the beginning of an exciting partnership with the St. Paul School system, the second largest district in the state, serving a substantial portion of the state's urban students. This program is designed to provide intensive learning and support for a cadre of middle school and high school teachers. MWP has worked collaboratively with leaders in the St. Paul School District to design the program to address the following goals:

- To improve the literacy skills of St. Paul secondary students.
- To address the needs and improve the skills of teachers who teach writing (in all content areas)
- To create a literacy program that uses St. Paul teachers in an ongoing, developmental way that will eventually provide an in-district network of support for training and coaching.
- To increase the literacy leadership base in individual schools.

The program builds on the expertise of St. Paul teachers who have participated in MWP summer institutes. TCs are working as Literacy Leaders to extend the principles and best practices of the writing project in the school district. This year they are assigned to 10 schools in the district. Through this collaboration we are "building the capacity" of a group of teachers to provide leadership in writing at their secondary school sites. In addition to the classroom teachers, the middle school literacy coaches (one each for math, science, social studies and ESL) are attending the sessions. Besides the training component, the program provides for ongoing support for planning, coaching and reflection at the classroom level.

-Marsha Besch, MWP Outreach Coordinator

Stay informed via MWP's Web site at
<http://mwp.cla.umn.edu!>

Conversing Beyond Borders: Dakota-Minnesota Writing Projects

Through funding from NWP State Networks border workshops for Minnesota, South Dakota, and North Dakota emerged. These workshops provide the opportunity for our individual sites to reach educators in areas of our states that are rarely served and to expand the visibility of our sites in these regions. TCs from the two participating state sites present sessions on best practices in writing.

A workshop in Worthington, Minnesota, for participants from South Dakota and Minnesota took place on Saturday, October 26, 2002. The day's program offered several rich sessions by TCs from our two project sites. TCs making the trip from Minnesota were Marsha Besch, Mary Beth Blegen, Lesli Erickson, Larry Gavin, Edie Stearns, Micheal Thompson, and Muriel Thompson. The workshop gave our sites an opportunity to work together, to visit with each other, and to provide opportunities to



Larry Gavin facilitates a workshop session and discussion.

identify staff development needs for individual teachers and school districts. Ultimately, we hope that this workshop might lead to additional programs in these areas. A workshop for the Fargo-Moorhead area is scheduled for Saturday, April 12, 2003.

—Muriel Thompspon, MWP Co-Director

Minnesota Writing Project

Writing Retreat

June 19-20, 2003

Mount Olivet Retreat Center

Join us for our MWP Writing Retreat –
enjoy the tranquil setting and

- write for personal and professional purposes
- reflect about your writing and teaching
- walk the nature trails
- renew acquaintances

Open to all MWP members, the cost of the Retreat (\$65.00) includes lodging, meals, and the June 19 afternoon presentation of writer Alison McGhee. Author of the newly published *Was It Beautiful?: A Novel*, as well as *Shadow Baby* and *Rainlight*, Ms. McGhee has expertise in writing and teaching genres such as creative nonfiction, poetry, children's literature, and book reviews. She was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Literature and won the 1999 MN Book Award.

Please hurry ~ space is limited. For registration information, visit <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

