

Minnesota Writing Project

Winter 2008

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A Newbie Discovers the Magic of NWP

by Candance Doerr

As a newly initiated Teacher Consultant (TC), I didn't fully comprehend what the Minnesota Writing Project was. Yes, I knew that it was a local chapter of the larger National Project (NWP) that forwards the notion "teachers teaching teachers," but beyond that, I pretty much saw it as a club of teachers who like to write and talk about teaching. While I was enthusiastic to be a member in this club, I didn't really understand the writing project's potential as a community or network to support educators.

It was my recent trip to New York City, however, to attend the 2007 NWP Annual Meeting, that I discovered the magic this organization and its true potential to effect change in education. I choose to use the word "magic," because of the emotional surge of excitement I felt sitting and talking with so many seasoned educators who were excited and passionate about their teaching. I admit, it could have been the New York coffee running through my veins, but there was an energy in the air, a feeling of mentorship, that I had never before felt in my previous staff development experiences.

While at the conference, I attended several workshops on digital writing, adolescent literacy, and how-to sessions for planning youth camps. At these workshops, I talked with other TCs from around the nation, all equally as excited as I was to examine these issues and try new programs at their writing project sites. Some of the others I met came from large writing projects that offered several programs for teachers and youth, while others came from fledgling projects just getting started.

For one woman I met from Michigan, the conference was an opportunity to forge a technology leadership team for her writing project. While another woman I met from Georgia was from a new writing project that did not even have a single technology liaison and was just starting to put together a website for their site. In both cases these women were excited about the community they had found in their local writing projects, which had provided a space outside of school to talk about issues. How inspir-



Kirsten Jamsen, Micki St. Sauver, Candance Doerr, Marsha Besch, and Muriel Thompspon gather to enjoy a night out in New York City.

ing it was for me to be surrounded by others who were so committed to teaching, so open to sharing ideas, and so invested in their NWP membership.

Besides meeting other educators from around the country, I also loved the opportunity to work in a more intimate way with those I see daily such as Muriel, Kirsten, Marsha, & Micki. Over multiple meals and subway rides, we were able to share ideas and feed off each other's energy. I remember specifically a moment at a diner just south of Central Park where we raised our glasses and toasted to "Time to Talk" --time, that is, to share our ideas and visions for MWP.

It is so rare that we have the time in our busy careers and family lives to slow down and think about our practice, our communities of support, our vision. Attending this convention helped me to see the power of MWP and NWP as networks. Far more than clubs, these networks connect educators to resources and people who have similar interests and common goals. Feeling supported professionally, albeit by those in other schools or states, is a necessary magic we need to thrive in our work.

This past November, Anne Lowe attended the English Language Learners' Network Conference in Los Angeles, CA. Hosted by the UCLA Writing Project, this year's group of ELL network TCs gathered in workshops and seminars to discuss issues and share experiences related to language instruction and English Language Learners.

With Different Eyes

by Anne Lowe

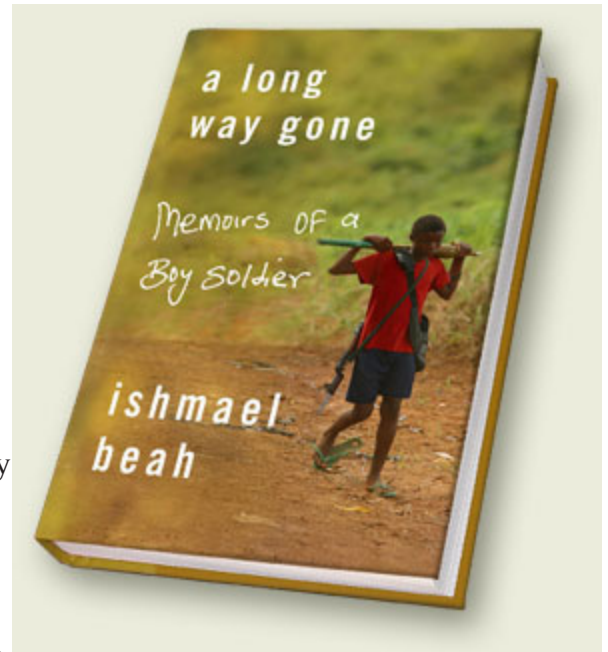
“Writing is the most important part of an education. It is very powerful. It is how to get your point heard.”

Though these words could be intoned by every Minnesota Writing Project member, they are in fact the words of Ishmael Beah, author of the memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, spoken in his keynote address at the 2007 National Writing Project ELL Network's conference With Different Eyes in November in Los Angeles. Begun by the UCLA Writing Project in 1991 as a venue for area teachers to share ideas on advocating for and challenging English Language Learners, the conference is now co-sponsored by the National Writing Project's ELL Network and attracts teachers from across the country. I was one of those teachers who traveled to L.A. to meet with my teaching colleagues from across the United States. We sat in the ballroom of the UCLA Faculty Center and were mesmerized by the young immigrant from Sierra Leone who had come to share his experiences with us.

Like many of our high school ELL students, Beah came to this country in his late teens with no school records; based on results of tests taken upon his arrival at an American high school, he was placed in 11th grade. Like many of our high school ELL students, he experienced interrupted schooling in his country. Unlike many, however, he brought with him deep scars and nightmares from his time as a boy soldier in his country's civil war, which started when he was just twelve. During his speech, he didn't hint at the terror of his experiences, which are greatly detailed in his book, but he did discuss his experiences in high school and college and how he came to be a writer.

“You have a voice you can use. You have a story.” This Beah learned in high school, after classmates began asking him to tell more about his life before coming to the United States. He wrote about how he had played as a child in Sierra Leone, but spoke nothing of the atrocities he had witnessed and partaken in there. He finished high school and went on to college, unashamed when he tested into remedial type English classes. “I knew I had to take these classes,” he told us. Through his writing classes, he began to realize how writing helped him begin to discuss the things he had seen in his country - things he previously could not talk about. His words were an inspiration to me. My students have also experienced great, sometimes unthinkable, disruptions and challenges; through writing I can help them find their voices so they can make sense out of their own life stories.

To that end, the conference offered many opportunities to meet with writing project fellows to discuss issues and learn ways to work with our older ELLs who come to us with limited schooling. During the pre-conference seminar on the first day, representatives shared how they were concerned with many things relating to ELLs in the mainstream: how do we help content teachers help their ELL students make sense of dense content area textbooks? How can we form alternative curriculum to or scaffold the scripted programs our districts purchase? How can we give our students a more authentic curriculum? We underscored the importance of knowing what language objectives we were teaching alongside our content objectives before handing out



any piece of text. The concept of language as power was discussed. Beah stated he spoke his own dialect at home, but learned British English in school. We need to teach students the difference between dialect and standard English, and that learning the language of power - standard English - does not mean giving up their own language. We need to help our students nurture their mother tongue while at the same time prepare them for a world dominated by English.

Professionally, the conference helped me gain perspective on how we are doing with our ELL students in Minnesota, but on a personal level, I was able to talk to colleagues and hear stories of their students and their lives. I connected with people who are physically from another part of the country, but philosophically reside in my own hometown: we are all grappling with how to improve our students' lives through writing and impassioned about finding more and better ways to do it. We all want to tell our students what Ishmael Beah told us: "You have a voice you can use. You all have a story."



The keynote speaker for this year's ELL network conference was author and human rights activist, Ishmael Beah. Born in Sierra Leone, Beah attempted to flee the violence of civil war but was later picked up by the government and enlisted in the army to fight the very war he had tried to escape. In his recent book, *A Long Way Gone: Memories of a Boy Soldier*, Beah

describes his experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone.

At age seventeen, Beah came to the United States, finished high school at the United Nations International School in New York City, and later went on to graduate from Oberlin College in 2003. He currently lives in New York City and is a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee. Beah speaks and writes often in advocacy for children affected by war.

For more information on Ishmael Beah visit: February 2007, NPR interview with Ishmael Beah:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7519542>

Additional Resources for ELL Teachers:

Educating English Language Learners: Implementing Instructional Practices (2007) by Jacqueline Vialpando and Jane Yedlin; with Caroline Linse, Margaret Harrington, and Geraldine Cannon (2005, National Council of La Raza)

This book, designed for teachers, features instructional strategies and helpful suggestions for engaging ELL students.

California English: Building Bridges with English Learners (Summer 2006)

This collection of short essays focuses on helping teachers to address the needs of English language learners.

Visit NWP website for chapter excerpts and/or full text versions of the books mentioned above.

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/programs/ell?x-t=resources.view>

NCTE Pathways — Pathways is a professional development initiative devoted to supporting teaching and learning with English Language Learners via online resources.

For more information on the program visit:

<http://www.ncte.org/profdev/online/adlit/126760.htm>

2007 Summer Institute Inspired Poems

“How Was School Today?” and “Ideas” were written by TCs Sherri Larson and Ann Thompson. Both pieces were written or took shape during the 2007 Summer Institute.

How Was School Today?

by Sherri Larson

I have brought you home again.

All day you rotated through my classroom at the bell’s signal. I looked at you in your rows and clicked attendance into the computer and asked you hand your homework up the rows. I asked you not to talk while I’m talking. I asked you about the foot/volley/basket/baseball game and you asked what’s for lunch. I handed out a worksheet and we tried to learn about semi-colons. I read out loud for ten minutes and you read to yourself for five points. I signed bathroom passes and lent out my last pencil. I constructed worded replies to emails from your mom about missing assignments and then I heard the final bell and you had your cell phone to your ear, your keys in your hands. Your backpack bounced on your back as you sprinted to the parking lot. I laughed and sighed in the hall with other teachers at the end of the day, and when my bag was packed with the assorted piles from the day and the parking lot had cleared and only the fumes of the busses remained, I left.

I meant to leave you there.

You weren’t supposed to, but you followed me home and now you are scattered around me and my house in various forms: you have smudged my hands and my sweatshirt and my coffee table with the soft lead of your penciled papers; paperclips slip from your collected works; tiny spiral paper edges from your notebook pages catch on my sleeves and stick between the cushions of my couch, and I lose the tv remote control under the precarious piles of your journals. I scrawl “Neatness counts!” along the margins of your sloppy paper. I see it’s messy so I cross it out and write it more legibly. Another episode of Law and Order begins its saxophone peal. I memorize who still has a blank space for “journal # 6” in the red gradebook’s neat columns and this will keep me up tonight,

but

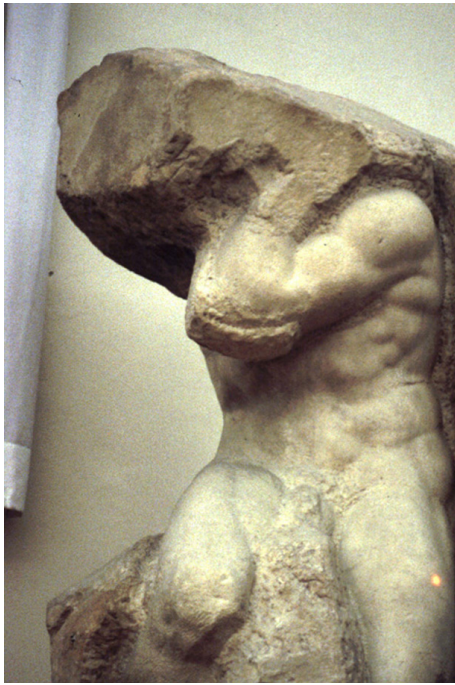
I will

talk

to you

tomorrow.





MWP Announcements and Upcoming Events:

MCTE “Playing with Words”

April 11th and 12th

The spring conference for the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English is fast approaching. This year’s MWP strand features several presenters focusing on writing. Check <http://www.mcte.org> for registration information.

Friday AM

- Sherri Larson – “Multigenre Writing: Expanding Creativity and Improving Writing”
- Kirsten Jansen – “Getting the Most Out of Your One-to-One Student Writing Conferences”

Friday PM

- Rick Beach, Liz Boeser, & Candance Doerr – “Using Online Roleplay in High School and College Classrooms”

Saturday AM

- Judi Petkau – “Artful Writing: Exploring the Art Museum as Writing Site”

Ideas

by Ann Thompson

Ideas!

So illusive.

One time effortless,
another time wrenching.
Most times meaningful
straight from the gut.

Ideas spring from
our passions,
love of someone
or something, and
bottomless pain.

It’s courage that moves
pen to paper,
but heart that propels
each word.

Like a sculptor,
we mold and carve,
until the words
unite with
our souls.

MWP Website gets a makeover

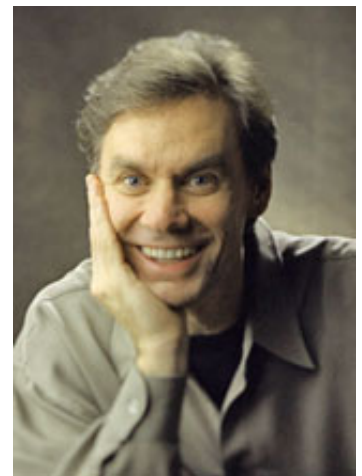
The past few months have marked a reflection and focus on MWP as an organization and network to support teachers. With this reflection has come a new website, reorganized for TC usability. Check our new site and let us know what you think. <http://www.mwp.umn.edu>

MWP receives grant to develop interactive website

We have recently received a small grant from Education Minnesota to research, develop, and implement an interactive component for the MWP website. We hope to include interactive pages for collaborative lesson planning and writing feedback. If you would like to be part of the focus group informing the development of this interactive component or have any suggestions for this new feature, please contact Candance at doer0026@umn.edu.

Author John Coy to speak at 2008 Summer Institute

John Coy, author of *Crackback*, a young adult novel focusing on the high stakes world of high school football, will talk with us at the 2008 Summer Institute about his writing career and process. This event, held on June 19th will be open to all MWP TCs. Stay tuned for further details or contact MWP at mwp@umn.edu. To learn more about John Coy, visit his website here: <http://www.johncoy.com/>





Milken award goes to Sharon Cormany Ornelas

This past fall, MWP TC, Sharon Cormany Ornelas, was one of two MN teachers who won the prestigious Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award. Sharon received the honor and \$25,000 award for her work with English Language Learners at Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis.

When asked to share how life has been since winning the award, Sharon described the experience as both “fun and humbling.” It has been fun in that her award involves a trip to Los Angeles to attend the Milken Awards Gala, which is described by some as the “The Oscars of Teaching.” Furthermore, the publicity of the event has helped her to reconnect with friends and colleagues. At the same time, Sharon has been humbled by the many emails she has received from peers seeking her advice and/or to observe her teaching. While she recognizes the honor in receiving the award, she is reminded of all the “amazing people and teachers” she works with everyday.

As for the \$25,000 award, Sharon’s plans for the money are also fun and humbling. In addition doing some international travel with her husband, she’d also like to put a new roof on her house. Other future plans include perhaps going back to school or visiting family in Mazatlan.

To learn more about the Milken Family Foundation Award, its selection criteria and other recipients visit:
http://www.mff.org/mea/mea.taf?page=notif2007_main

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