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Falling in Love in Vegas: NWP/NCTE 2012

Candance Doerr-Stevens (ISI 2007)

This year's National Writing Project (NWP) and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual meetings took us to Las Vegas, Nevada. Amid the nonstop lights, music, and second-hand smoke of the Vegas casinos, I fell in love. I have a colleague who talks fondly of her elopement in a Las Vegas chapel. My rendezvous, while less romantic, was filled with much wooing on the part of various rubrics, checklists, and frameworks for assessing writing. I have always been a fan of words, but the more I explore the words and phrases we use to describe what students are doing when writing, the more excited I become to use that language to help them grow as writers.



A Vegas institution



Conference buddies Stephanie Rollag, Candance Doerr-Stevens, Chuck Jurich, and Susan Perala-Dewey

My courtship with assessment did not begin in Las Vegas. Over the past few years I have been growing more and more interested in the language we use to describe writing, especially as "writing" becomes increasingly complex through integration of digital technologies and social media. My dissertation research on school-based documentary production continues to challenge my understandings of writing and how to "teach" it.

Further fueling my interests have been recent mumblings in our state to remove the burdens of high-stakes testing, a campaign issue Governor Mark Dayton voiced and continues to pursue. Would elimination of state-based testing lend itself to incorporating national assessments? With the Common Core initiative, many states are considering comprehensive assessments such as those designed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Coalition. Would such moves



Assessment, Vegas style

help us to better understand writing or learning in general?

With these questions in mind, I traveled from assessment session to assessment session, which often took me from one hotel ballroom to another in search of the marriage between writing and assessment. Coincidentally, but not surprisingly, all of the NCTE sessions I attended on assessment presented frameworks that were started in some way through teachers of the NWP.

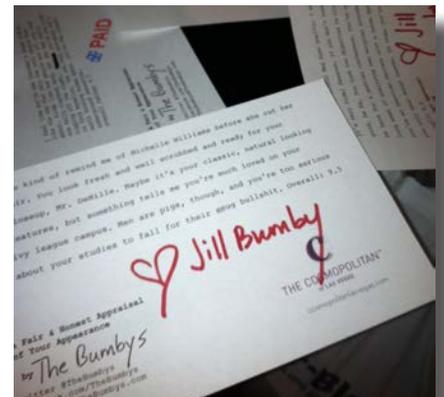
The first session I attended was on **6+1 Traits of Writing**. This is not a new framework for assessing writing, but has proven to have staying power with its presentation of 6+1 (that's 7, for the non-math majors in the group) traits or qualities for assessing and teaching writing: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions, and Presentation. I was impressed

to see that some teachers are adapting the 6 Traits framework to digital writing through use of the Presentation trait, including within Presentation an attention to audience and purpose. Most teachers I have talked with find the Traits to be helpful, especially in providing a common terminology to discuss writing. Yet some educators have complained that it has too heavy a focus on the final product and that it is less flexible with nonfiction texts, especially when discussing the concept of voice.

Another assessment session I attended described the **Analytical Writing Continuum (AWC)**. This framework, built on the foundation of 6 Traits, also offers a wonderful vocabulary and a superb framework or continuum for informing instruction, professional development, and research on the teaching of writing. It differs mostly from 6+1 Traits in its reconceptualization of the Voice trait as Stance, which allows more for the perspective-taking that is necessary when writing and reading nonfiction and informational texts. What I'm especially drawn to with this framework is its **emphasis on teachers as the central players in assessment**. Ideally, this framework is implemented so assessment experiences are collaborative learning experiences for professionals. The hope with AWC is that teachers who use the framework will not only have a better understanding of what their students can do with writing, but will also feel better prepared to teach and talk about writing with their students.

The final assessment session I attended was on a newer and less well-known framework, the **Multimodal Assessment Project (MAP)**. This framework seeks to encompass non-print texts as well as traditional texts such as the academic essay. In doing so, it attempts to deemphasize the final product, or artifact of writing, in order to consider the entire process of writing in the assessment. To get started, this framework uses well-known rubrics such as the Washington State Content/Organization/Ideas and Conventions Rubrics (HsCoSSS), the above-mentioned 6+1 Framework and AWC, as well as common film rubrics, and applies these to a variety of digital texts such as VoiceThread compositions, digital stories, and other media texts. Through this convergence of assessment rubrics, the team identified elements that were missing and devised the following criteria: Context, Artifact, Process Management, Substance/Content, and Habits of Mind. These five criteria, or "domains," isolate and limit the focus on product and thus limit it, while also heightening focus on Context, Process, and Habits of Mind (thought processes). While I am excited about this new framework, I fear that it may be too ambitious in a time of high-stakes assessment, which assumes all learning can be compressed into some final, tangible product. That said, I find it of paramount importance to keep my eye on this framework, especially as our definitions of writing expand and become increasingly unstuck in time and space.

What was perhaps most revealing about my explorations in assessment was an event that my colleagues and I experienced on our last night in Las Vegas. After dining on charred octopus, we strolled through the marketplace of the Cosmopolitan Hotel and Casino and stumbled upon an art installation that invited passersby to partake in a "Fair & Honest Appraisal of Your Appearance" by Mr. and Ms. Bumby. (**Visit this link to view our fast-fingered assessors.**) Interested in how these appraisers might assess our appearances, all four of us stepped in line. We stood alert as cloaked appraisers looked us up and down and typed appraisals of our outward appearance and demeanor in the form of short stories. As crazy as this may seem, we were not the only ones to so



A written assessment

willingly offer ourselves to be judged by strangers—groups of other people stood in line, waiting for their turn to be evaluated.

After being appraised, I learned that I “have a youthful Meg Ryan quality.” What does that mean? Is that good or bad? Assuming that this must be only a Vegas thing, we asked one of the producers about the event. He said that the installation has experienced much success across the country. He went on to say that the experience taps into human nature, that we all secretly desire to know how others view us. Furthermore he explained that the cards or print appraisals, produced using old fashioned typewriters, serve as ice-breakers in a culture that while hyper-connected electronically, lacks the social ease to interact in face-to-face settings.

This experience revealed to me that we all harbor a secret love for assessment. We want to know if what we are doing has value to someone other than ourselves. In many ways that is what all forms of assessment or evaluation do. They provide us with coordinates for where we stand. In terms of formative assessment, they provide us with the “ice-breaker” needed to enter the text, and the space to discuss what is working and what is not. Most importantly the assessment provides us a threshold from which to begin conversations about how to proceed with our writing, our teaching, and our lives. I hope that my many rendezvous with assessment prove fruitful in my own teaching.

MWP TC Publishes Her Research on Using Writing Groups

The most recent issue of *Voices from the Middle* (volume 20, issue 2, December 2012) focuses specifically on the different uses of grouping in middle schools. In it, middle school teacher Gretchen Hovan (ISI 2008) shares her experiences using writing groups with students. Gretchen not only uses grouping in her classroom but also participated in “group learning” through her entire process of writing this article, working with four other MWP TCs in a writing group.



Gretchen Hovan

Writing for a Built-in Audience: Writing Groups in the Middle School Classroom

Gretchen Hovan

Abstract: In this era of high-stakes testing and densely packed state standards, it is too easy for writing to become a meaningless process, useful only for school. Many strategies can help to get all students writing, but this author set out to find a strategy to help students see the power of writing and to know that their voices matter. Writing groups are what finally made writing a meaningful experience for all students in this classroom. Through research and experimentation, the author learned structures to make this special kind of group work effective and saw how writing groups transformed students’ ideas of writing and the writing process. Writing groups gave students access to an authentic and meaningful audience for their writing. Reflecting on how to give helpful comments promoted a deeper understanding of the role and power of revision.

For more information and teacher stories about group learning and to take a peek at Gretchen’s work, visit the most recent issue of [Voices from the Middle](#). (You must be a current member of NCTE in order to view the articles online.)

2013 Saturday Session Workshops

Using Media to Enrich the Common Core Literacy Standards

January

26

Focus:

How to use the media to meet the needs of struggling students with special emphasis on boys and literacy

February

23

Focus:

How to incorporate new genres of media production into current teaching practices

March

9

Focus:

How to use the media to explore issues of social justice and global awareness with special emphasis on race, culture, and history

Place: Minnesota Department of Education
Conference Center A
1500 Highway 36 West
Roseville, MN 55113

Time: 9:00 a.m. –12:30 p.m.

Cost: \$50 per session

Registration Deadline: January 11th, 2013

Graduate Credit Option & CEUs available

For more information:

Minnesota Writing Project | Phone: 612-625-6323 | Email: mwp@umn.edu

Registration Deadline: January 11, 2013

Mail to: Minnesota Writing Project, U of M, 10 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive, S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455

Name _____ Email _____

School/District _____ Phone _____

Home Address _____ City, State, Zip _____

Courses/Grades Taught _____ Make checks payable to: University of Minnesota

\$50 per session Jan. 26 _____ Feb. 23 _____ Mar. 9 _____ Amount enclosed: \$ _____

Innovation in Collaboration: People and Ideas Get Intimate in New Spaces

Jen Kohan (ISI 2011)

Collaboration takes many forms. We collaborate with students in our classes, with teaching and administrative colleagues, as well as with parents and other community members. Throughout my career I've known teachers who sequester themselves in private classroom empires and resist collaboration, all the while grumbling that they don't get enough support. It is the very act of collaboration, however, which allows us to support each other. As a member of the Minnesota ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) communications committee, I want to bring together people from my favorite collaborative communities, starting with the Minnesota Writing Project (MWP).



Making connections—Jen and Steph with CoLab colleagues

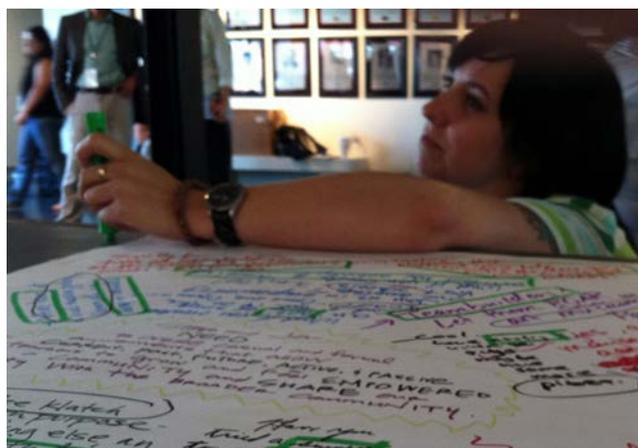
After participating in the MWP Invitational Summer Institute in 2011, I became one of the committed and enthusiastic partners who flank Muriel Thompson, the director of MWP. This past summer, when Muriel suggested I might be interested in attending a National Writing Project (NWP)-affiliated workshop in St. Louis, I jumped at the chance. I would attend the week-long 3rd Space workshop with my new friend and MWP colleague, Steph Rollag (ISI 2009). The workshop was to be hosted by a group called **The Cultural Landscapes Collaboratory (The CoLab)**. Steph and I knew nothing about this group. We shared one very important belief, however: NWP professional development opportunities are some of the very best.

The materials Muriel forwarded to us were a little vague—and yet highly specific (sublime contradiction was to become a theme for the week). The advertisement used the words “leadership” and “innovation” and a model called Responsive Design. We understood that we would not be meeting at the Piasa Bluffs Writing Project host site, but would instead be gathering in three museums over the course of the week. This seemed appropriate, considering that another hallmark of the CoLab is its emphasis on “co-expertise.” The group’s manifesto defines the CoLab as “a multiprofessional community of Teacher-Researchers, Visionaries, and Doers.” So far, so good....The manifesto proclaims:

We are collectively transforming our classrooms, schools, and cultural settings from ordinary places into extraordinary human-centered spaces for 21st century learning. Through innovative multigeographic collaborations, we are humanizing our classrooms, schools, and learning institutions. In doing so, we are making these places into spaces for transformative learning, where learners grow into their expressive potential through courageous and radical collaborations.

Steph and I had no clue what we were in for in St. Louis. Muriel and fellow MWP guru Candance Doerr-Stevens tried to brief us on MWP initiatives, but essentially they wanted for us to engage with the week in whatever way might be most helpful for us as teachers, MWP consultants, and representatives of the Minnesota Writing Project. We discovered that this is partly what defines the leadership at MWP: teachers are the leaders who collaborate to support learners.

So what did we discover at CoLab? Ourselves. Our friendship and common beliefs. That we own the same sweater. That it is frustrating to paint a building with latex without knowing why. Why it feels good to howl to “the wild rumpus” in a massive, still art gallery. What it means to look through a pointed lens and interpret in new ways. How to be actively rather than passively empathetic. How community can share and collec-



Jen deep in thought



Creating

tively create meaning. That needs are not always clear and are often only clarified with the help of empathetic outsiders.

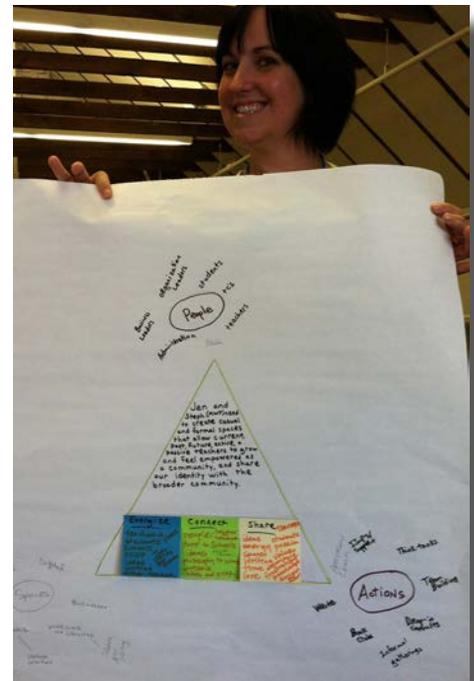
The three interwoven facets of CoLab’s Responsive Design model are to explore, envision, and enact change through empathetic conversations and innovative models and prototypes. The “3rd Space” we explored in St. Louis was much more than a simple geographic place. As Mike Murawksi (then education director for the St. Louis Art Museum) put it, the 3rd Space is wherever “ideas go to have sex.” That provocative concept was one of many that resonated with me that week.

We spent two full days building community with individuals from nine NWP sites and three museums, led by the dynamic Dr. Ralph Cordova, co-director of the Piasa Bluffs site at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, just outside of St. Louis. The other educators I met were immediately like old friends; however, I experienced a good deal of discomfort throughout the week.

I was restless because I wanted to envision without exploring. We needed to explore not only our site’s needs, but our individual needs as well. Steph and I processed our experiences over martinis, salsa dancing, and gales of laughter. We emerged with a clear plan, and the collaborative partnerships we made will surely last for years. After we came home, back to our regular lives, Steph said she had a “3rd Space” hangover. I felt the same, but we were both excited to get to work, too.

We agreed that the time spent building community that week was invaluable. We relished the informal time spent with our colleagues in the evenings as well, exploring the city and picking each other’s brains for ideas and feedback. That special 3rd Space was itself our answer—Steph and I have resolved to bring teachers and other educational partners together in informal spaces, with an MWP touch. Each month, we will host an event in a different place, with a different theme—no registration, just watch for the dates on Facebook and Twitter and invite a friend. I’m really looking forward to this new perspective on professional development.

CoLab’s values have become part of the fabric of who I am as an individual—I am more fearless and motivated to enact change without fear of failure. I’ve already prototyped several innovations since returning from St. Louis, in collaboration with my colleagues at school and a growing web of “co-experts.” I’ve enacted change in my own classroom as well, for my students are the ultimate inquirers with whom I’d like to collaborate.



Generating ideas

Stay Connected: Visit Us on Twitter & Facebook!

The Minnesota Writing Project has recently started a Twitter page to make it easier to access and distribute information about upcoming events and local resources for writing and teaching. If you are a regular on Twitter, please check us out and follow us: [@mwpcconnect](https://twitter.com/mwpcconnect).

Also please visit [our Facebook page](#) and “like us” to keep nourished by these local tidbits.



MWP TCs Lead Summer Youth Programs Focusing on Literacy

Summer 2012 continued the momentum of a new partnership between the University of Minnesota Sports and Recreation Program and the Minnesota Writing Project. The partnership offers new opportunities for teachers to design their own youth programs for working with Twin Cities youth. TCs Maria Theissen (ISI 2010) and Alex Papp (ISI 2009) taught two sessions. One session was titled “Digital Originals,” in which they worked with elementary students writing and composing multimodal poetry online using iMovie. Another session, titled “Campus Eyewitness News,” offered students a non-fiction version of media production, in which students roamed campus with flip cameras to capture and report the news of the University.

A third youth camp offered last year was taught by TC Christine VeLure Roholt (ISI 2003). In this session Christine helped students develop their own Storigami by putting words on each fold of an origami shape until the final shape (and story) emerged. At the end of the week students picked five origami shapes they wanted to learn to fold and then created a story and illustrated it with their origami shapes. Fabulous folding masters emerged!

We hope to offer more literacy-based youth camp programming in the future. Please contact Muriel Thompson at murielt@umn.edu if you are interested in leading a future youth camp.



A student works on his youth camp project



Maria and students work on youth camp projects



Alex Papp confers with two youth camp students

ISI Involvement Leads to a Transformative High School and University Writing Center Partnership



Burnsville High School coaches, October 2012

“Can I bring my Burnsville High School writing coaches to campus to visit your center?”

When, in late 2011, teacher-consultant Marie Hansen (ISI 2011) contacted the U of MN’s Center for Writing directors Kirsten Jamsen (ISI 2004), Debra Hartley (ISI 2008), and Katie Levin with what she thought was kind of a wild request, they welcomed the opportunity to establish a meaningful collaboration that would benefit both writing centers.

Working with graduate writing consultant Kristen Nichols-Besel, the team developed an activity designed to meet two goals:

- to introduce the high school coaches, who volunteer their time tutoring other students before and after school in Marie’s English Language Arts classroom, to an established university writing center that employs consultants and serves writers from across the disciplines
- to give these high school coaches, many of whom had never been a writing center client, the experience of sharing their own writing with a writing consultant

Marie’s writing coaches first came to the Center for Writing in March 2012; this event was such a rousing success for all involved that she brought a group of new coaches in October 2012. Debra Hartley created a brief video about the October collaboration; [click here to view the video](#). Planning for a spring collaboration is already underway: participants will either experiment with online consultations or reverse roles, with university consultants being coached by their high school counterparts.

This Burnsville–University collaboration is a result of several years of grassroots conversation about developing writing centers in early education and K-12 environments. During recent ISIs, many MWP teachers met with writing center administrators and consultants in the Center for Writing. To bring these teachers together with other local teachers who had created or were building middle and high school writing centers, the Center for Writing formed the E-12 Writing Center Collective, an informal group of about 60 local teachers who communicate via a listserv and meet three times a year to share strategies for starting and developing writing centers in their schools.

To join the E-12 Writing Centers Collective, please contact Kirsten Jamsen at kjamsen@umn.edu.



Marie and Kristen talking to the students before their consultations



A coach/writer revises while an SWS consultant looks on



Consultant, coach/writer, and coach/observer



A coach/writer and consultant talk about the paper



Minnesota Writing Project offers an Open Institute for Teachers

CI 5410: Writing Process and Thematic Inquiry: Writing for Social Justice 3 Credits

Facilitated by Stephanie Rollag and Jessica Dockter Tierney

The MWP Open Institute will be a workshop, not a traditional class. In it you will focus on three areas:

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 course.

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 connected to the theme of social justice might include:

- Exploring the connection between personal and social justice writing
- Taking action through writing
- Examining a variety of genres
- Using mentor texts/text sets
- Bringing social justice topics into the writing process
- Assessing social justice writing
- Investigating digital writing options

When?

Monday-Friday,
June 17-21,
Tuesday, June 25, &
Thursday, June 27.
9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Where?

Nicholson Hall
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis East Bank
Campus

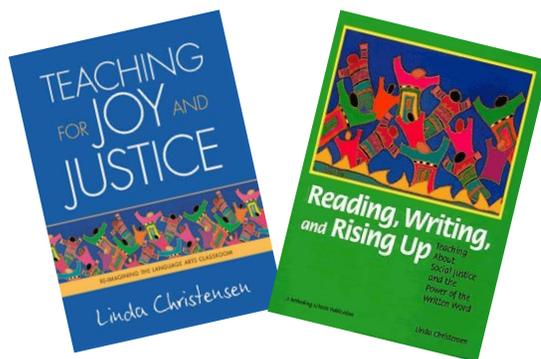
Who?

Teachers in all

- grade levels
- content areas
- experience levels

Past Invitational Summer and Open Institute participants are welcome, as are both degree and non-degree seeking students.

We encourage experienced social justice educators and those new to the theme to join us!



“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 information on how to register for the Open Institute, contact mwp@umn.edu

Announcements & Upcoming Events

Upcoming MWP Workshops

2013 Saturday Sessions

See [flyer included in this newsletter](#) for more information. Email mwp@umn.edu for workshop openings.

Upcoming Summer Institutes

2013 Invitational Summer Institute (retreat June 26-27 and institute July 8-26)

Please consider nominating a teacher from any discipline, K-college, who you think would benefit from and contribute to the literacy-based leadership experience of the summer institute. Nomination forms can be found on the [Summer Institute page](#) of our website.

2013 Open Institute (a graduate course)

This summer we will offer a mini-institute, open to teachers from any discipline, K-college, including those who have already attended the Invitational Summer Institute. The MWP Open Institute course will offer 3 graduate credits and focus on writing for change and social justice. [See the flyer included in this newsletter](#) for more information.

Joyce Sidman to Visit MWP in June 2013

Author Joyce Sidman will be the guest presenter at this year's retreat for the 22nd Annual Invitational Summer Institute on Wednesday, June 26th, 2013. Sidman has written several poetry books for children, including *Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night*. See [Sidman's website](#) for more information.



Joyce Sidman

Other Events

MCTE Spring Conference—Thursday–Friday, April 11–12

This year's conference, *Teaching All Standards, Reaching All Students*, will be held at Hilton Mall of America, Bloomington, Minnesota. For more details [visit the MCTE website](#).

Supporting MWP

In this critical time of decreased funding for our project, please consider showing your continued support by making a fully tax-deductible gift to the Minnesota Writing Project (Fund #6464). For more information, please [visit the giving page on our website](#).

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