

Denver Writing Project



The Advanced Institute Revealed

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Folks picnicking at the DWP Reunion

Important Dates & Reminders:

- The October Writing Retreat is this Saturday, October 4th, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Tivoli on Auraria Campus. For more information, contact Nicole. Piasecki@ucdenver.edu
- We are in Summer Institute recruiting season, so if you know of anyone interested in participating in next year's Institute, please encourage them to apply. The application deadline is early January.

It takes me awhile to get used to summer. The first week is full of small shocks, like when I first realize that it's 7:30 am and I'm still on my porch drinking coffee, watching the sunlight coat the flowers. Every year, as I adjust to summer, the beginning of DWP's Advanced (Alumni) Institute looms. Inside my head I argue: I've just *finished* getting up every morning to work for others; don't I deserve some time for myself now? I try to remember *why* I liked the institute so much last summer. I finally coerce myself to pack a week's clothing, load the car, and make the drive to the city.

June 18, 2007. Monday morning I walked into the tiny room in the South Classroom Building, a little late as usual, and my eyes skimmed the other faces in the classroom. I still couldn't think clearly enough to remember why I was there. The faces I saw said that it was a little too early in the morning, and the room was a little too bright and white, but abruptly, as I met the gaze of old friends, my doubts and complaints faded and I was there, really in that moment: excited to be challenged, to laugh and write and meet new people. In fact, within minutes we were laughing heartily about being re-named "advanced."

The Denver Writing Project has become one of my lifelines. I teach in a rural school district where my extra duties list is longer than the list of things that I do as a teacher (although those duties don't take as much time as planning, teaching and grading). Without the CLAS conferences and my colleagues from the writing project, I might have left teaching by now (my critical fifth year).

I entered this past summer feeling especially drained. We'd had a particularly challenging group of 9th graders. I felt debilitated much of the year by my inability to "differentiate" for kids who read and write at a 5th grade level in the same classroom as kids who read and write at 11th grade and above. I was overwhelmed by planning for two new classes, grading, supporting my colleagues, counseling students, planning for prom...

What's the difference between the Summer Institute and the Alumni week? In an inadequate nutshell, it's more concentrated and more collaborative. We share the same language; it's like a retreat. I leave the Advanced Institute able to re-enter summer without the baggage of the past school year. Here's a sampling of things

that re-charged my batteries: over the course of the week this summer we laughed together about flip-flop odes and Freudian slips; and we relegated grouching to the back shelf. I began many pieces of writing; I workshopped two pieces, and I learned. I have a new quiver of tricks for making my old assignments more creative and interactive; for adding imagery and description to writing; for teaching new things like Odes and Invectives; for better understanding the needs of my ELL students and for interconnecting reading and writing assignments. As a team, the alums delved into teacher inquiry – how to narrow our questions and formulate the "data", what to consider as data, with whom to share questions and successes.

In the past few summers, one week at a time, I've been exposed to ideas about brain research, assessment, teaching methods tailored to meeting different learning styles, using writing to puzzle out math, pre-writing in science class, using big ideas and self-assessment in social studies, peer evaluations, co-teaching, and reciprocal teaching. I've learned from colleagues who run extracurricular

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Reflections...

Normally I'd be talking; this time I listened. Usually I want center stage, this time I wanted to be grounded. I watched and studied stature, cadence, and inflection. I deferred to some and chose heroes among others. I watched as people in my writing group unraveled their secrets—those they chose to tell—and I tried to stay centered rather than risk falling into the vortex of the emotional pain of others' lives. These were lives that had success and money written all over them, people you might find fascinating at a cocktail party. These were the men and women of my non-fiction narrative writing class at the Maui Writers Retreat held August 25-31, 2007. This was one of the most intense experiences of my professional life.

The retreat was comprised of an eager and polished group of attendees, taught by crème-de-la-crème instructors. My facilitator/instructor for Narrative Nonfiction II was Pulitzer Prize winner Ron Powers. He has written extensively about Mark Twain and, among other works, his Flags of Our Fathers was made into a movie. HW Brand, professor and biographer from the University of Texas, facilitated Narrative Nonfiction, and Sam Horn, self-help guru perhaps best known for



Participants of the '08 Summer Institute

Tongue Fu, led a non-fiction class. Fiction instruction included workshops by Jacquelyn Mitchard, William Martin, Thomas Cook, Ann Hood, Karen Joy Fowler, James Rollins, Anne LeClaire, and Friday Night Lights author, Buzz Bissinger; The Way of the Peaceful Warrior author Dan Millman led the Body/Mind/Spirit class. There was also a screenwriting class. The overall attendance of the conference was just under 200 adults, and we loved it.

The conference started with a moonlit terrace and catered buffet for a Saturday night get-acquainted social; the official kickoff was Sunday afternoon. From there until the following Friday noon, we ate, lived, and dreamed writing. And the dream continues: my email box has never been so full from correspondence with those intense and passionate writers from all over the world. The encouragement from my colleagues has been overwhelming, and that, to me, defines the success of our shared

experience.

In order to get on the mailing list for this annual conference, go to the website mauiwriters.com. If you have a serious project and want to either workshop it or pitch it (the agent/editor weekend is tacked on after the retreat) this is a great event to attend, and well worth the money. I found the richness and levels of the learning invaluable. Sitting in informal writing salons at the end of the day and chatting with best selling authors somehow makes you feel that your writing dreams are not delusions, but possibilities. The whole experience was validating, educational, and altering. It made even an underdeveloped writer such as myself think that yes, I can do it.

All of this, and Maui, too.

~Christena Southwick

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The Advanced Institute Revealed

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programs, teachers in elementary through college classrooms, and teachers who focus their energy on literacy coaching for all content areas. Simultaneously, I have become a resource for my colleagues back at school. More than anything, I realized that I have unique lessons and techniques to share with others, and that when I feel alienated in my classroom, I can check my own notebook of writing from the past summers to ground

myself and my teaching.

In August of 2007, I returned to my classroom with confidence, with faith in myself as a teacher, a writer and a thinker, and with an energy that I haven't felt at the beginning of school for the past few years. I know that when I have a low moment, I will be able to call a DWP colleague, a friend. I will speak with someone who will understand and listen, and who will remind me of what I believe is critical in teaching today. I also know that the week before the sum-

mer institute next year I will again question the sanity of spending a week indoors with other DWP alums, but I will come, because otherwise I wouldn't be the same teacher. I need the healing and the spark that the institute awakens in me. I need my writing project.

~Kate Clark



From Rick (DWP's former director):

Research is an essential part of the writing project experience.

In the summer institute, we read research written by teachers for whom the challenges of teaching and learning become sites of inquiry into their own practices. During the school year, teachers involved in the DWP Inquiry Group conduct classroom-based research in order to better understand their work with students. Indeed, every teaching demonstration in the summer institute may be considered research, for each one illustrates a search—or re-search—for better ways of impacting achievement. As we'll see in the new Saturday Seminars this year, teachers who present student work samples as part of their demonstrations give their teaching practice a powerful empirical edge.

The National Writing Project has a demonstrable interest in such empirical edges, for it seeks to add persuasive evidence to support its claims about what works in the teaching of writing. To see what I mean, look at the newly designed NWP website. There, on the first screen you'll see an article about the results of the Local Sites Research Initiative (LSRI), a four-year, multi-site study that showed significant gains in writing achievement for students of teachers who have participated in NWP programs (as compared with students of teachers who have not).

Rigorous comparative studies showed that the NWP cohort outperformed the control groups in seven measures of writing performance: content, organization, stance, sentence fluency, diction, and con-

ventions. Strong results in content, organization, and stance—some would say the most important aspects of writing well—indicate solid growth in thinking and writing. And, as is noted in the positive results for conventions, "for those who wonder if an emphasis on ideas and written expression hinders the development and mastery of conventions, we see here evidence that it does not—that these skills can be learned as a product of attention to content, organization, expression, and the like."

How do we know that what we do in the classroom makes a difference? The LSRI, the DWP Inquiry Group, and teaching demonstrations that include student work, all seek to answer that vital question.

~Rick VanDeWeghe

From Michelle (DWP's new director):

Greetings! I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. A little over a year ago Rick VanDeWeghe asked me if I'd be willing to assume the position of director of the Denver Writing Project. I was deeply honored but also a bit daunted by the task. Rick, as many of you know, is a legendary figure around here, and the DWP carries the reputation as one of the most exciting, cutting-edge sites in the nation. (Rick has told me to avoid "big shoes" metaphors in my writing, so I'll try to do so here.)

Over the last year, Rick has moved into a new position with the National Writing Project and has mentored me through my transition into the director position here in Denver. I share Rick's passion for cultivating teacher inquiry, teacher study groups, and intensive writing workshops, and more importantly, his desire to distribute leadership and decision-making among local teachers.

The DWP is run by local P20 educators who have a deep interest in shar-

ing best practices and delving into the issues that face Denver's urban and suburban public schools. Our recent Summer Institute gave 18 local teachers the space and time to write together and collectively inquire into new ways to engage students who for various reasons are reluctant to write in school or struggling to learn the English language. Many of this year's participants demonstrated how a variety of aesthetic modes (performance, poetry, visual art) give students a playful, less threatening path into the thinking and writing process. I've asked these participants to share their ideas in upcoming newsletters, on the website, and in future retreats and alumni institutes.

In the meantime, we want to know what you, as teachers and writers, need to support your best practices and inquiry on important issues in your school. Would demonstrations or a study group on ELL issues, technology in the classroom, family literacies interest you and/or your colleagues?

Please email me your interests at Michelle.Comstock@ucdenver.edu. Or simply email me to introduce yourself. I'm anxious to meet all of you in the coming months.

~Michelle Comstock



Mentoring: A Veteran's Dilemma

Mentoring new teachers is an important aspect of our profession and deserves serious consideration. As I try to become a more effective mentor for my colleagues, though, I consistently run into a philosophical roadblock: how honest should I be regarding the procedural inconsistencies and politi-

It seems important that we veterans try to nurture new professionals, and that help seems especially important at certain (predictably) low periods of the year – January to Spring Break, for example, or after difficult student or parent confrontations.

cal double-speak that is inherent to our profession?

I've tried to construct my own career on a solid foundation of honesty – with my students, colleagues, and superiors. The approach has worked pretty well, and people seem to appreciate it. So as I explain the realities of the profession to less experienced colleagues, I try to be straightforward with them as well. I am often torn, however, between conflicting impulses: on one hand, to spell out for new teachers exactly where I think we are as a public school system—which often entails a pretty dire diagnosis—and on the other hand, to try to bolster their confidence and enthusiasm for the job we do. It seems quite a slippery slope, and much as a parent treading carefully with his own child, I feel myself grappling with how much to reveal, how far to go, how honest to be.

It seems important that we veterans try to nurture new professionals, and that help seems especially important at certain (predictably) low periods of the year – January to Spring Break, for example, or after difficult student or parent confrontations. It seems reasonable that some reassurance from a reliable mentor that *This, too, shall pass* might go a long way toward making an inevitably trying year more bearable.



My own uncertainties arise in the middle of these crises, however, when as a veteran I want to explain: *This is the nature of our crazy profession, one of the core reasons why public education in America is in peril.* I also want to explain to novices that most of the problems we face are typical of our job, *so don't blame yourself for not being able to resolve them perfectly.* I never intend to indoctrinate new professionals to the “downsides” of teaching, but instead to assure them that they are not alone in their struggles. I am concerned, though, that my message to novice teachers may be disheartening rather than reaffirming, distressing rather than soothing, or depressing rather than energizing. Worse, I worry that my advice regarding how best to navigate the profession and which pronouncements may be ignored might lead a novice teacher into trouble with her superiors.

So how far should we go—in teacher education classes at the university, in public school classrooms, and in mentoring sessions—toward explaining to

new teachers exactly what the teaching profession is really like? Is honesty still the best policy? For the first time in quite a while, I'm stumped. I feel like a new teacher all over again, and I welcome your advice.

~Rich Argys

From the Editor:

When someone asks me what it is we do, and I mean a collective we of writing teachers, I acknowledge that we are preparing our students for academic success when we teach writing, but we are, more importantly, preparing our students for a life filled with demands to write. Our students will wear many different hats as we send them on their way; on the same note, this newsletter showcases all of the hats we wear as DWP Fellows. Christena Southwick's reflective writing on the conference in Maui gives us our professional side, Rich Argys's piece gives us the perspective of teachers mentoring other teachers. Kate Clark's piece reminds us to reenergize ourselves after a long year of teaching. Rick VanDeWeghe kindly reminds us that teacher as inquirer is yet another facet as an educator. Michelle Comstock offers support and guidance and an opportunity to voice our needs. And certainly not least, but last, Dale Liddicker sends us a message through his poetic writing that we are human beings not humans doing. We Fellows may teach writing, but we are still writers at heart.

~Cat Jones

Denver Writing Project

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Teachers Teaching Teachers

www.denverwritingproject.org



Denver Writing Project was founded in 2000 within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado at Denver. As a local site of the National Writing Project, DWP strives to improve student writing and learning by improving the teaching of writing in our nation's schools. Following the NWP standard of "teachers teaching teachers," DWP brings teachers together to collaborate on the teaching of writing and the writer's craft. DWP's quarterly newsletter strives to open the lines of communication among site fellows and to bring our news to the larger NWP community.

The editor welcomes suggestions or feedback for this or future issues of the DWP Newsletter. A very special thank you to all those who helped, volunteered, or contributed in any way.

This newsletter is a reflection of ourselves. If you want to be a part of our newsletter, contact me at Catherine.jones@ucdenver.edu.

Psalm: An Inward Voyage

*Beneath waves of change
lies the ocean of changelessness
Yea, though I sail
through the metaphoric dream
I shall navigate through
the illusion of fear and death
My ship gives me comfort
my solace against the storm
I will reach the centre; the calm singular Eye
of life's raging tempest
Surely,
tranquility will fill my Being
my individual wave merges
with the larger sea`
Surely,
I am One
with all things
Surely...*

~Dale Lidicker