



Summer Institute transforms teacher's classroom

by **Christina Durso**

Stumbling into the GVWP Summer Institute I didn't know what had hit me. I was inundated with talk about "teachers as researchers," the impending doom of my own demonstration of best practice, and plenty of my own struggling-writer samples.

The preview weekend flew by in a blur of reader's workshop, the fundamentals and development of The National Writing Project, and a book buying frenzy! As I struggled to drag my book bag overflowing with pedagogy down the interminable path to my awaiting chariot, I thought to myself, "Boy, do I have a lot of reading ahead of me."

My "chick lit" was grudgingly thrust aside, so I could be swept away by the reproducing stack of pedagogy looming atop my desk. During the next month I read, took vigorous notes adhering a fresh sticky note to almost each page of books by Caulkins, Murray, Elbow, and Graves, and contemplated my current teaching status. I quickly understood that I had a lot of curriculum to change in my classroom.

A new teaching philosophy abruptly took over me. I was suddenly thrust into a fresh realm of teaching. My eyes opened up onto a

fresher, more brilliant day. I understood why I taught the way I did, and also knew that some curriculum needed to be completely eliminated or taught completely contrary to my former teaching practices. Everything seemed much clearer. Questions were answered and needs met.

The growing need to explore pedagogy only worsened when receiving the opportunity to read and share nearly each day of the four week GVWP Summer Institute.

Nearing the end of the institute I logged on to Amazon.com religiously to purchase new pedagogy hoping to extinguish my burning need for new knowledge and strategies that really work in the classroom.

Beginning the new school year was a unique experience for me. I longed for August 18th with anticipation to have a revived start when all of those freshly tanned faces would precariously appear in the doorway. The fire subsided somewhat as I actually got the chance to try out all my newfound strategies on my students.

During my sophomore English class' work on Tom Romano's Multigenre Project, my students began to see the light that I so clearly witnessed this summer. They began to see the value in writing.

Choosing their own topics and exploring different modes of writing, they greedily took ownership of their work. This work looked intensely altered from the writing they had completed freshman year. As they explored with their writing some students approached me to thank me for letting them write for themselves and teaching them how to tame this beast of composition. I thus, turned to my overflowing bookshelves and thanked the researchers and teachers who paved my way.

After the summer institute my perspective and philosophy of teaching has drastically changed and thus my classroom has morphed as well.

I now know that I have somewhere in addition to my colleagues to turn to if I have a burning question, problem, or need clarification on a classroom issue. My students are reaping the benefits of my research. I now know that I have an accessible place to turn if I need assistance with an aspect of my teaching, and it's open 24 hours a day! After all, the answers are a mouse click away.

Christina Durso currently teaches English at Sierra High School in Manteca. She is a 2003 Summer Institute Fellow.

Writer flourishes through

by Chris Dempsey

“Next Friday, July eighteenth, we are going to San Francisco on a writing marathon. Tomorrow I will give you an article that explains what a writing marathon is,” she said.

“She” is Carol Minner, director of the Great Valley Writing Project. We were only a few days into the 2003 Summer Invitational Institute when she made the announcement. As promised, the following day, Carol handed us each a copy of Richard Louth’s article, “The New Orleans Writing Marathon,” from *The California Writing Project Quarterly* for Winter 2002.

I read with increasing interest how the participants formed groups of three or four people and visited different locales in New Orleans. There the groups spent time writing, then shared with each other what they had written. They only stayed in any one location for a little while before moving on. If asked what they were doing, they were instructed to respond, “We are writers.” Louth’s article made the idea of a writing marathon much more appealing to me.

That Friday morning, we joined the morning commuters riding BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) into the city. I was in a group with two others, Carol and Christen. We arrived in San Francisco at about noon. Our first order of business was to find the rendezvous point at Justin Herman Plaza. We only had to walk a few blocks in order to reach the upscale shopping complex known as the Embarcadero. I admired the elaborate circular stone patterns on the sidewalk as we walked.

Our second order of business was

to eat lunch. We decided to order from a crêperie. As we were enjoying our lunch, a homeless man whose bushy sideburns hung in long white strands from his head decried in Al Pacino’s voice, “You’re in my movie!” I could not distinguish the rest of his accusations, and I could not determine whether he was addressing one person in particular or the lunch-hour crowd in general. I did make a mental note about him, comparing him to other street people I had observed when I lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

After our meal, we began our writing marathon in earnest by walking through downtown San Francisco. En route, I caught a glimpse of pigeons, and was reminded of their predominance in cities. I also quickly found I had to learn how to be an urban pedestrian all over again. I observed how style of dress determined who had the right of way. For example, I was wearing jeans, a colored T-shirt, and over that an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt. When crossing a crosswalk, I encountered a businesswoman in a power suit. By her presence, it was clear to me that she expected me to yield to her, which I did.

The homeless man I had seen at lunch, the city pigeons, and the Forgotten Rules of Crosswalk Etiquette, all became raw material for the following poem. I wrote several drafts, finally revising it for rhyme at the end of the day.

Pecking Order

Pigeons in the city
have taught the people there
the dynamic of the pecking order
now practiced everywhere.
So children of metropoli

don’t have any fun;
while crossing busy crosswalks
they must yield to everyone.
It’s not a whole lot better
for those who’ve reached their
teens,
as they must yield to grown-ups
clad in slacks or jeans.
But even these adults
are not exempt from rules;
they must yield to everyone
adorned in dress or suit.
And every single city-zen
avoids deftly as he can
the ranting bundle of tired rags
that used to be a man.

Within a very few blocks, we reached our first stop: a small park, including a redwood grove, beside the Transamerica pyramid building. I was immediately taken with the fountain there. It is surrounded by bronze frogs on bronze lily pads. The frogs are in various states of leaping (just taking off, landing, jumping on each other’s backs) and form a ring around the fountain.

Just across the park from the fountain is a statue of a group of children holding hands and running. The realism of the statue is amazing. Viewing these two pieces of art, I played the ever-fruitful “What if...?” game. “What if,” I wondered, “the children were trying to get to the fountain to catch frogs?” The ideas evolved from there. Here is the result:

Leapfrog

Bronze frogs
launching from lily pads
frozen in mid-leap
around the city fountain.
Across the square
a chorus line of children

opportunities in Institute

races towards them
eager to splash around in the
water,
try to catch the frogs,
drive them away
with their Playskool clumsiness.
The children
are clasping hands,
their faces wet with mist,
their bronze hair
forever blowing back
according to their creator's
design.
Together
they lead a perpetual charge
towards their objective,
the froggy fountain
which they will never reach.

Studying their bright burnished
cheeks
is a little boy,
his own face
a stone
chiseled by skyscrapers
of steel and concrete.
A tear escapes his eye
as he perceives
with jealous bitterness
a mirror of himself
and a rustic joy
he may never know.

Along the way, we had also
passed a stonemason working on the
Embarcadero sidewalk with a bucket
of mortar, a trowel, and a power
sander. As I walked by, he was
blowing away the powdery residue
of dried mortar he had just sanded. I
found it remarkable the way he
seemed completely indifferent to the
very busy foot traffic around him.
He (and the intricate sidewalk
pattern) became the subject of
another poem.

The Stonemason

Crouching
on a busy Embarcadero
sidewalk,
he carefully dips his trowel
into his bucket of mortar,
gently applies the thick mixture,
already prepared in precise
proportions,
to the fertile sidewalk bed.
Then he judiciously selects a tile
and lays it in place,
then another
and another.
Indifferent to
the legs, the feet,
the wheels, the paws
of the pedestrian traffic
around him,
he arranges the stones in a circle.
Around it, he grows another,
and then another.
Soon the sidewalk blossoms
with the brick flower
he has cultivated.
Next to it
is one he planted
yesterday.
It's had time to dry,
so, with his rotary sander
he meticulously
sands the mortar
between the tiles,
lovingly pruning
his garden.
The stones
are now covered
with fine powder of urban pollen.
Kissing away the dust
with his breath,
he collects his tools,
and, whispering a prayer,
abandons his children
for the indifferent
city-dwellers
to trample.

Due to time constraints, we only
stopped to write at one other locale: a
pub. There Carol treated Christen
and me to a drink, and I revised the
poems I had written.

After twenty minutes there, it was
time to return to Justin Herman Plaza
to meet with the entire company. We
hurried back and reunited with
everyone. Although we talked about
our various adventures (and, in some
cases, misadventures), we did no
sharing of our writing with the whole
group that day. At that point, I read
back through my journal for the day
and discovered that a narrative entry
from our BART ride into the city
would work well as a poem:

Confrontation

(Confessions of a White Man's Paranoia)

A young man
wearing headphones
and carrying a cheap, bright blue
nylon backpack
is standing across from me,
his arms curved out like
parentheses
at his sides.
He is poised for a gunfight,
itching for an excuse
to draw.
I glance up at his face
and notice he is black.
His brow is furrowed,
his eyes cold, narrowed,
searching,
as he stares in my direction.
I shift uncomfortably
in my seat
and timidly retreat back into my
notebook,
anxious only to prevent
a confrontation.
Then I remember

continued on page 6

High school students learn about academic writing

by Susan Engstrom

College professors in every discipline continually express concern that entering freshmen often are not equipped with the skills they need to be successful in creating written work that is of the quality expected by their instructors. At the high school level, students practice writing as required by different courses, but do not always have access to the technology and materials they will see at college. The Great Valley Writing Project and California State University, Stanislaus together provided the opportunity this summer for students to get a preview of these aspects of academic life.

As an English instructor at Ceres High school and a GVWP teacher consultant, I was asked to prepare and facilitate a program that addressed the writing needs of the college-bound student. Could a *Young Writers' Program* offering be created for high school students that introduced them to the caliber of writing they would need to produce during their college careers?

In order to prepare for this first-time offering, I explored the college website in search of sample assignments and rubrics so that I could understand what professors wanted in terms of student work. Having graduated from CSUS in 1979, I knew that expectations and certainly technology had changed drastically from what I had been familiar with in the late seventies. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that syllabi for freshman English composition courses are updated to

incorporate the aspects of a portfolio, peer input in the form of internet "blackboards" upon which students post writing in progress, and help sites for essay formats, as well as the more traditional forms of research writing. These methods reflected the tenants espoused by GVWP, that writing is a process which works best with outside input; it should not necessarily be practiced in isolation. Writing is to be shared

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We also explored current events topics in order to facilitate discussion as preparation for utilizing the writing process to define our ideas.
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with others!

Based upon this information and premise, the first *Young Writers' Program*: "Academic Writing for the College-bound Student" was held at CSUS from August 4-8, 2003. Participants signed up for the institute from Ceres, Pittman, Tracy, Johansen, and Downey high schools. The sessions were constructed around a goal of producing one college-level piece of writing (any essay genre) to be included in an anthology.

To this end, the daily structure of each session consisted of a beginning mini-lesson that introduced or reviewed an aspect of successful writing techniques and/or styles, a read-around session in

which participants took turns alternately sharing the piece in progress or listening and giving structured feedback on their partner's work, a journal writing session to sharpen thought processes, an hour in the computer lab to do research and write/revise, and an ending segment in which the participants shared what they had found useful in that day's meeting and what they felt needed changing or improvement.

We also explored current events topics in order to facilitate discussion as preparation for utilizing the writing process to define our ideas.

Utilizing the university computer lab to do research and compose written work also allowed us to explore modern college expectations (the aforementioned class "blackboard" is an example).

Ray Estrada from the *Turlock Journal*, joined us to share his ideas on the importance of clarity in writing for communication and the necessity to practice writing in order to achieve that goal. Lastly, a tour of the CSUS campus allowed the participants to get a glimpse of life as a college student.

Our writing experience culminated in an anthology. To facilitate the sharing of writing, we created a support system for the coming school year by exchanging email addresses, allowing interested participants to continue the peer input begun during the sessions. My school email was added to that pool to enable students to send future work to me.

continued on page 5

Young writers have chance to play with words

by **Kaye Osborn**

Pencils tap danced quickly across white pages, exploding into magical images. Thirteen enthusiastic writers yearned to share their unique writing voices. Pride echoed in their voices as they read their stories. Each writer was applauded for his or her efforts.

The two week, four hour a day workshop held at California State University Stanislaus is open to students in grades 5-8.

Three high school writing assistants, who graduated from the Young Writers Workshop, helped facilitate. Casey Giffen and Kaye Osborn offered an entertaining and motivating experience. The students explored various genres culminating

continued from page 5

In their critique of the sessions, students told me that they really enjoyed having access to the computer lab in order to do research for their work and to revise their writing. They stated that they found using the lab assisted them in the writing process because it allowed them to perform both research and revision tasks at one sitting, switching between the Internet and Microsoft Word easily. It also allowed them to produce many draft copies of their writing to share with the group for input.

After the computer lab, students said they liked having other students read their essays and offer positive comments and suggestions, as they found input from their peers gave them another perspective on the effectiveness of their writing. The students also expressed appreciation

with an anthology. The students worked on word choice, idea expansions, an autobiographical moment, and poetry. Tom Meyers, an award winning poet, enriched the workshop with various activities.

This year the students stayed overnight at the dorms which offered them a taste of college life! The experience was memorable.

Here are samples of some Wind Sparks:

I dreamed I was
a forty-nine cent CSUS pencil
writing, doodling, and drawing
chance-takingly
Jacob Giffen
10th grade

for the guest speaker, requesting that more diversified professionals come and explain how writing assists them in their occupations.

The chance to see not only what college classrooms look like, but also what typical accommodations and activities for the college student might be, was also very interesting to all participants.

In all, the students indicated that they found the sessions enjoyable (“I liked seeing how someone uses writing day-to-day”) and useful (*The aspect of writing I learned about most was...* “When you write, try to be clear and make your point,” “Translating my own thoughts”). One student suggested longer sessions, indicating a desire to cover material in more depth.

As an instructor, I profited from “Academic Writing for the College-bound Student” as well. The

I dreamed I was
a fierce, independent eagle
flying, soaring in the sharp,
sapphire sky
swiftly

Emelia Stuart
4th grade

I dreamed I was
a shimmering crystal orb
predicting woes and victories
from my velvet pedestal
mystically

Megan Stroupe
8th grade

Kaye Osborn teaches at Lakewood Elementary School. She has been a TC with GVWP since 1988.

opportunity to “go back” to college for the purpose of researching this class afforded me insight into how university requirements have changed; not only do I have a better idea of what my students will be expected to do once they leave high school, but I am now in a better position to assist my peers in their quest to prepare their students for college. Perhaps most valuable was meeting the talented group of students who signed up to part with a portion of their valuable summer free time to work at improving their writing skills. Without their inquisitive attitudes and willingness to try new techniques, this program would not have been possible.

Susan Engstrom teaches English at Ceres High School. This was her first experience in a Young Writers Program. She is a 1990 Summer Fellow.

Camp leaves facilitator with sense of fulfillment

by Colleen Keenan

I am one of those crazy people who teaches summer school every year. This past summer my world was rocked when they cancelled my program. How dare they! That was my summer money.

Luckily a friend came to the rescue when she suggested that I facilitate a group of writers this summer. I just couldn't pass up this opportunity to enjoy the company of other writers and get paid for it.

Fearful of going solo on this endeavor, I solicited the help of Julie, a fellow TC. Her specialty was poetry which is my weakness, so I knew we would make a good team. Soon we had dates, times and plans.

I met the writers on Monday of the first week. We were a small eclectic group, which included a set of twins.

That first day we interviewed each and sized each other up. I knew this

continued from page 3

I am sitting beneath
the transit map
and I realize
he is simply checking
for his stop.
As the train slows,
he approaches the door
immediately to my left.
I can now smell his sweet
cologne.
The train shrugs to a stop.
His scent
follows him out
as the doors open
and, much to my relief,
he exits.

It was about three-thirty in the

was going to be an experience the likes of which I had never had before.

What surprised me most about the group was their willingness to share their work with each other. Every young writer shared.

And they all seemed to understand the art of critique. They were gentle but specific and offered suggestions when asked. Julie and I felt like outsiders at times. It seemed they did not need us: that's a good feeling for facilitators.

As the weeks passed and the pieces for the anthology came together, we discovered that we had a room full of future poets. Every writer published a poem.

There were poems about nature, sports, wildlife, people, relationships and even the weather. There were sad and happy poems, factual poems and introspective poems.

The students' personalities distinguished themselves in their

afternoon. Carol declared our day officially over, and we all went our separate ways.

On the ride home, I had the chance to reflect on my first writing marathon. Granted, the day had not gone as expected. I never once had the opportunity to tell a stranger, "I am a writer." (I suspect writers are commonplace in San Francisco.) We did not take the time to share our writing that day, and nobody shared in the larger group at the end of the day.

In her book *Radical Reflections*, children's author and writing instructor Mem Fox writes, "Whenever I write, whether I'm writing a picture book, an entry in

prose as well as the poetry. We had a rewrite of *Vanity Fair*, a memoir about baseball, a horror story, fantasy and autobiography.

They labored on these pieces and helped each other. They revised and rewrote and edited and rewrote again. We could not have asked for a more dedicated group of writers.

But these were not just writers--they were a unique group of young writers.

The third through eighth grade span was challenging, yet they all rose to the task, showing a level of writing maturity well beyond their years. It was a pleasure working *with* them. Our experience was as valuable for us as it was for them. I guess we weren't so crazy after all.

Colleen Keenan teaches fifth grade at South West Park Elementary in Tracy. She is a Summer Institute Fellow from 1996.

my journal, a course handbook for students, or notes for the milkman, there's always someone on the other side, if you like, who sits invisibly, watching me write, waiting to read what I've written. The watcher is always important (Fox, 9)." Later, she records, "When the refreshing ideas of Donald Graves swept through our writing classes in the early eighties, I believed that the ultimate purpose in writing was to be published. Since then I have become a published writer myself, and I realize how wrong I was. It's what happens beyond publishing that's important: it's the response to my work that matters."

continued on page 7

**Great Valley Writing Project
Summer Institute 2003**

Fellows

Jose Aldaco

Waterford Middle School

Deanna Andrade

Jefferson School

Pretta Condon

Hunt Elementary

Christen Davis

Monticello School

Chris Dempsey

La Loma Junior High

Christina Durso

Sierra High

Lynn Lysko

Stanislaus County

Office of Education

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Summer Institute 2002

Returning Fellows

Tina Bell

Teel Middle

Sally Hale

Glick Middle

Carol Minner

Jefferson

Alane Vaughn

Stanislaus County

Office of Education

Inspiration strikes

Editor's Note: The following are excerpts written during Stephanie Paterson's *Nine Ways of Looking* presentation given at SI 2003.

by Lynn Lysko

"I feel inept. I haven't read enough, especially of any of the people you reference on a regular basis. I don't know where to start. I want to take your class. I want to write; better yet, I can't wait to play with it, even if no one will ever read it. I hope I can do it. You make me think I can."

She remembers. He was her seventh grade composition teacher and his name was Mr. Cadeski. He challenged his student's creativity and imagination, rewarded effort with constructive praise and infused the desire to write more. The student is reminded of her former teacher; she thinks sadly that she holds unexpressed gratitude to him for the confidence he gave her writing. She is now grateful to the new professor for reviving that early writer; it won't be left unsaid again.

Mona Lisa

I remember. Standing in front of

her in le Louvre, I wondered, as millions before me, "What secret does she have?" "What is she thinking?" To me, she is a writer. I place her in a garden, quiet, with quill and ink at her side, a new idea formulating for a story. Her smile causes me to think – it is surely about a man. She lifts the feathered quill to trail over her cheek to her lips, pondering, remembering, deciding. As she lowers her pen to the parchment, she thinks of him and how fortunate she is to be able to read and write. He supports her learning when so many do not. She feels privileged, yet pushed. Now there are all these thoughts within her that scream for release. In a way, knowledge has not been freedom, it has been a curse...the curse to constantly create, the curse to express, the curse of never finishing... She is a writer; she pauses for a moment and, hearing the gate open, turns and smiles at her muse. "Papa," she says softly. "I was just thinking of you."

Lynn Lysko is a consultant in Instructional Support Services at Stanislaus Co. Office of Education.

continued from page 6

Like Fox, I had looked forward to the response to my work, but I had to wait until our next author's chair a few days later. Nevertheless, I found the marathon to be a very inspirational experience, offering a wealth of subject matter outside of myself and to some degree, away from myself as the sole subject of my writing. In addition to the four poems I wrote, I made so many more observations for pieces I have not written yet, may never write; but the material is there if I choose to take

advantage of it.

I realized that all of the writing we had done to date at the Summer Institute, particularly the Word of the Day exercise, had prepared me for the writing marathon. I rediscovered the excitement and spontaneity of observational writing. I learned that wherever I am, even if I'd rather be somewhere else, there is always something to write about. The writing marathon showed me that even within the parameters of a prescribed assignment, I have a choice of topic, approach, and point

of view-- a lesson I will no doubt share with my seventh-graders. I look forward to continuing my own personal writing marathon throughout this coming school year and the rest of my life.

Work Cited

Fox, Mem, *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning, and Living*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1993.

Chris Demsey currently teaches English at La Loma Junior High in Modesto. He is a 2003 SI Fellow.

Because Writing Matters

Visit our Website!

www.csustan.edu/gvwp

Writing is the single most important skill for students' academic and professional success. Yet in the last twenty years, it has received little attention in our nation's schools, and national assessments show that just one in four American students is able to write proficiently. *Because Writing Matters*, a new book by the National Writing Project and Carl Nagin, affirms that writing must be a central focus in all classrooms if schools are to improve student performance.

You may order *Because Writing Matters* at the NWP website: www.writingproject.org.

We encourage you to visit our website often to check for new programs and information. Also available on our website is an order form for the GVWP publication *Over Our Shoulders and Into Our Classroom: Best Writing Practices, K-12*.



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In Print, the Great Valley Writing Project newsletter, is edited by Juliet Michelsen. Comments or concerns can be directed to julietmichelsen@earthlink.net.

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