



Teacher's journey to SI takes 15 years

by Genevieve Beltran

My journey to the GVWP Summer Institute began fifteen years ago. My friend Maggie Saffen, who had attended a Summer Institute at U.C. Davis in the 1980s, insisted I should participate in the Area Three Writing Project. I wanted to create a class community of writers as Maggie had, but with my five children still young at the time, attending an SI that far away seemed impossible. Still, the call of writing beckoned.

As I continued to scribble away at my own writing-poems and stories for my students and a satirical newsletter for my school staff-I welcomed the curricular changes engendered by the integrated language movement. I didn't know its philosophy was based on the work of such visionaries as James Moffett and Donald Graves or that Jim Gray had founded the Writing Project to encourage teachers to develop writing for real purposes within their classrooms. All I knew was that students were being taught to express their thoughts in a manner that seemed natural to their learning.

Maggie retired when our district made a scripted language arts program mandatory. Writing was relegated to the practice of individual skills and assigned topics. Choice, expression, and individual voice were no longer of primary importance. Test scores dominated. Following the new curriculum, I squeezed in meaningful writing activities when I could, but I knew that I wasn't giving my students' writing the time and attention it deserved.

Hope arrived when my friend Martha Salcedo and I participated in

the GVWP Build-a-Better-Workshop in the summer of 2006 under the supportive direction of Melissa King. A summer workshop in which teachers work in small groups and one-on-one with student writers, the BBW reminded us that, like Nancie Atwell, the pioneer writing instructor whose example we followed, our true mission was to foster a genuine love

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of writing within our own classrooms. Returning to school, Martha and I longed for the ideal environment of the BBW, but our journey into Writing Project teaching was far from over. Melissa King, Brandy DeAlba, and Frances Chamberlain from our BBW experience continued telling us that we should participate in the Summer Institute, just as Maggie had insisted I do so many years earlier.

Participating in the GVWP 2007 Summer Institute, Martha and I were embraced by a community of teacher writers. Under the inspiring leadership of writing coaches Carol

Minner, Stephanie Paterson, Tom O'Hara, Theresa Gill, and our peers, we learned by example, discussion, and a world of research that supports effective instructional practices. Formally introduced, this time, to James Moffett, Donald Graves, and Jim Gray, we discovered that we were part of a venerable teaching tradition, regardless of whatever swings the educational pendulum may take.

Swinging into a new school year, Martha and I now realize that a meaningful writing experience is not something to be "squeezed in" as an afterthought; its primacy is foremost on our minds when we plan for class instruction. Moving beyond our classrooms, we plan to host a book study group, a writing club open to all grade levels, and family night writing sessions. By doing so, we hope to light the flame of inspiration in others just as the Summer Institute has done for us.

Reaching out to others is a hallmark of the National Writing Project. In *Teachers at the Center*, Jim Gray recounts one teacher's relief to discover like-minded educators on the opening day of the Bay Area Writing Project's first Summer Institute in 1974: "I was thinking that maybe I was the only teacher in the world who cared about teaching writing (Gray 54)."

The Summer Institute's message to teachers of writing is the same one that Jim Gray shared that day and the one Maggie tried to give me so many years ago: *You are not alone.*

Genevieve Beltran teaches third grade at Lathrop Elementary School. She will present her Saturday Seminar March 8 in Stockton.

Book studies foster conversations, support

by Lisa Simao

My first experience with professional learning conversations was at the school I was hired at 16 years ago. The school was in an inner-city elementary of more than 1200 students that was rich in diversity and languages but that had challenges with poverty, gangs, and high mobility rates. I was lucky enough to be involved in one of the first California School Restructuring Grants.

I learned the power of professional learning through discussion, observation and discovery. As part of the restructuring efforts, the school was divided into four families. Each family consisted of K-6 grade teachers. Most of the classrooms were

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in open pods. It was a perfect setting for a new teacher like me. You could watch and listen as the other veteran teachers would teach. This was my learning ground where I learned about being a part of a professional learning community, learning about the power of discussion through protocols.

Additionally, I had a wonderful and caring principal who nurtured not only the students but the staff as well. Even today, I consider what he did ahead of his time. He would put

articles of interest in our boxes to read. We would often read Michael Fullen, *The Change Force* and several other books and articles from leading researchers in education reform during our staff meetings.

These discussions and the more focused professional learning book groups make up some of the highlights in my teaching career. I first heard about book study groups facilitated by teachers from a colleague of mine through Great Valley Writing Project. The idea of having a group of educators coming together with a common purpose of professional learning conversations through book study impressed me. Many professional development offerings I had attended were one-shot deals with little or no follow-up to the training. So much money goes into education to promote changes, but I believe Michael Fullen says it the best, "Focusing on people is the most effective way to change any organization. In fact, it can be argued that organizations do not change, only individuals change. It is only when enough of the people within an organization change that the organization can be transformed (Fullen, 1993)."

My first professional learning book study group that I formed began when I was in another large year-round school. It seemed that every month there were teachers coming on or going off-track. Creating and maintaining a professional learning community was difficult to say the least. We know more than ever before on how to teach our students effectively. Yet, we have very little time to go deeper with our own learning and our observations of teaching. We need professional conversations to not only have collaborations and plan more effectively, but also to have the support and to learn from each other.

At my last book study group, my cutting-edge principal signed up

and attended. It was encouraging to have an administrator being a part of the professional conversations. The following year, our entire school participated in professional learning conversations. We read Rick DuFour's *Whatever It Takes: How*

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Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn. Our staff meetings were often filled with professional conversations. I still remember some of the chapters from that book, and the reading and the conversations left a lasting positive impression on my teaching.

Last year, my school district supported and encouraged a book study on Robert Marzano's *Classroom Instruction That Works*. To have common strategies and goals district-wide is powerful.

I encourage you to start or to join a book study group either at your school site or expand out to another school.

professional learning for teachers within school com-

Steps for Facilitating a Book Study Group

The following are steps that I used for forming a professional learning book study group at your school.

Select a Text

1. Finding a book that interests everyone can be challenging. Consider what the group wants to learn more about. There are so many “must” reads being published every year. I have found some great publishers that focus on professional learning books for educators such as Heinemann. I have been fortunate to receive support from either Great Valley Writing Project or my principals who have purchased the books.

Get the Word Out

2. To advertise, I sent out flyers to several schools. Getting the word out is very important. E-mail is also an easy tool to use for teachers to learn about your book study group. For district-wide groups, I would also e-mail principals at sites so they could tell teachers during staff meetings. On the flyer I included a title for the book study group. I used “Literacy and the Elementary Teacher.” Also on the flyer I indicated the course outline and general objective, the title of the book, and the dates and times we would meet. Typically, we have met 90 minutes every week for 10 weeks, which made university credit available through Great Valley Writing Project. Group size has usually been about 11-15 teachers. This group size allows all group members to be able to engage effectively with each other.

Discussion Options

3. Figuring out how to read and discuss the book is the best part. I have refined this area after each book study. At our first meeting time, we introduce ourselves and then we do a quick write on what we want to get out of this book study. We share out

what we have written. I make it very clear that this is our book study group. I want everyone to enjoy it and not to feel like it is one more thing for them to have to do, but to utilize this group as a learning tool.

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In order to take care of logistics, I have a three-column sheet I pass around while everyone is looking through the book that we will be discussing. One column contains the date of each meeting with corresponding chapter titles of the book broken into manageable chunks. Another column is for the note taker/scribe for each meeting. The last column is for snacks. Each person signs up to be the facilitator once for the chapter(s) chosen, once to be the scribe, and once to bring the snacks.

I facilitate at the first meeting and bring the snacks. This way I can model one way they could facilitate the chapter. We brainstorm ideas for presenting the chapter(s), such as bringing in student work to analyze,

doing a few strategies or activities from the chapters, jigsawing the chapter out and having the groups present, having round table discussions and so on. Once the chart is filled out with everyone’s names, I run copies and hand it out before we leave the first meeting.

I find it’s also important to have a sign-in sheet for each meeting, especially if when offering university units.

For homework, everyone is to read what is going to be presented at the next meeting.

I’ve also found that we need to have materials brought to each meeting, just like any other staff development workshop. I always have chart paper, markers, tape, pencils, and sticky notes.

Evaluation

4. At the last meeting of our book study, we evaluate the process of the group. Did it meet their expectations? How might we improve it for next year? Was this a valuable experience and why? This is a very crucial part. This has helped me refine each book study group to make it as effective as possible.

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Alternative education through power

by Claudia Danielsen

Almost four years ago I unknowingly carried baggage coming from a traditional classroom setting to my new 7th-12th grade alternative education students. I knew in my heart of hearts that curriculum design and expectations would be different from my prior experiences. I never wanted to expect less from my students as far as goals were concerned, and I never wanted to limit the educational services I could offer to help their futures. What happened, however, was that I learned to look at writing differently. By letting my students write everything, I now work to free my students from the belief that the five-paragraph essay is the only writing which will lead them to become better and more powerful writers. The confining and restrictive feeling I once had when soon teaching writing gave way to an adventure in writing.

My school is located at an emergency children's shelter. The residents are taken out of their homes by Child Protective Services and live on the shelter's grounds until they are placed in a foster home or group home. Across the fenced quad are their living cottages, a playground, the gym, the offices and my school. There are many obstacles for these residents to face on a daily basis. There is a universal theme of students feeling a loss of power, control, and choice. The social workers, attorneys and shelter staff make decisions for them according to the many laws that are in place to protect them. I can be seen as just another adult who will tell them what is expected of them without taking into consideration where they are emotionally. I have come to learn that a relationship based on mutual trust and respect must be established quickly.

Our shelter receives approximately 1,900 kids every year so I may have a student for an hour or four months, and the rate of return is very high.

They can refuse to attend school or leave the classroom without any real consequences. So I found myself faced with designing and creating curriculum that both fell under the umbrella of California State Standards and taught what I felt the students needed. Our county program believes in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs so that a student's physical and emotional needs are the concern and priority before he or she is willing to

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participate academically. With this understanding, I still wanted to see the narrative essays written, the high quality expository research projects completed and many other expected writing genres. What I didn't know was the process that would lead my students to meeting these writing requirements.

It all started with small writing prompts in the morning such as Morning Messages, which shared

different experiences they faced while living together and trying to attend school. I shared some poetry about my own strained family relationships that put me out there emotionally and they saw the risk I took sharing personal information, which leveled the emotional playing field. Many found poetry an avenue to express themselves and to communicate ideas about various issues important in their world of survival. Art infusion and music lyrics became a path that invited poetic and creative writing. Once the poetry flowed, a play came next. Students developed an idea for a play that stemmed from collective life experiences regarding facing choices of drug use. The play was photographed and chronicled in a scrapbook on a table for the classroom next to other writings.

The most popular narrative writings were essays based on "Finding Hope Through Adversity." Students linked personal life experiences to literature and historical readings in class. They began to express their thoughts and feelings about facing adversities on a daily basis and still finding strength to attend school or leave the shelter to live with strangers once again. These personal stories helped the next set of students realize their own strength and perseverance and more writings were added to our scrapbook, which are now five in number. Students started to request certain background paper and stickers to adorn and showcase their work. Personal pride began and was evidenced when they returned and saw their pieces were still available to read. Many were visibly impressed when they reread their writing and some added to the original piece or wrote an additional entry. Interest and confidence began to grow toward other writing genres.

A school newspaper was created which validated concerns and helped students write about their own interests of sports or music. The newspaper expanded to movie reviews, interviews, games, poetry,

students find their voices of writing

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One of the most amazing experiences for me was when a gang member, on her own time, created a petition to have razors available for the girls to shave their legs while residing at the shelter. She created the petition, made rules and consequences, and asked residents to sign. The petition was presented to the shelter administration, and they agreed to have razors for showering purposes. These unique writing genres and examples of empowerment continued. Students were finding their voices.

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cooking ideas, pet tips, school activities, field trip experiences, and many more topics. One of the most amazing experiences for me was when a gang member, on her own time, created a petition to have razors available for the girls to shave their legs while residing at the shelter. She created the petition, made rules and consequences, and asked residents to sign. The petition was presented to the shelter administration, and they agreed to have razors for showering purposes. These unique writing genres and examples of empowerment continued. Students

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We hosted a themed restaurant once a month. The theme was connected to our curriculum and the students created decorations, menus and food items. Food was prepared and jobs practiced as we served food to 40 guests in our gym. Academic work was displayed in a variety of ways, such as display panel boards, invitations, and writings on the back of the menus, handouts noting diabetes warnings, thank you notes, and customer surveys, among many others. Prior to teaching at this site, I never would have considered all of these writing genres important.

When I look back at the variety of writing activities I can see a transformation in my thinking. The change stems from understanding what my students needed to write about to understanding that they will become better writers and feel free to write if they follow a writing continuum. The continuum starts from validating personal experiences in a variety of ways, moving to having those writings available in the classroom for the next student to read, and looking at a staff compliment book, menus and lists as writing. I spend the time teaching about the various writing genres and validate the need to write often.

Involvement with the Great Valley Writing Project has provided research and resources that have created a foundation of understanding that has changed how I teach and view writing. This new understanding has allowed my students freedom to write often and has helped facilitate their voices in a variety of ways. Our class now collaborates with students who attend one.Odyssey, another alternative school in our program. Our students use teen-authored narratives as topics for discussion and comparison. In addition to this approach, my students' anonymous pieces are topics of discussion for the university class I teach. My students are absolutely thrilled that

their writing is viewed as something to respond to and worth sharing. I look forward to including other writing experiences that can offer my students a chance to develop their voices and contribute to the world around them. I am grateful to my students and my colleagues for the varied writing opportunities and also would like to encourage my students to find their voice when so many people want to silence their words. So the baggage I once hauled around is now left behind, and I am free to write!

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Careful reflection, planning

by **Juliet Wahleithner**

I often find myself quoting the National Writing Project motto of “Teachers Teaching Teachers.” As anyone who has been through an Invitational Summer Institute knows, this is who we are and this is what we do. However, some times we have to go back to the drawing board to re-think how we do this teaching of other teachers. Not only that, but sometimes as teachers of teachers, we find that we need time to re-connect and extend our own learning so that we can be better both in our own classrooms and in our interactions with other educators. It was this realization that led to the creation of PLLA - pronounced play - or the Professional Learning Leadership Academy, a three-day advanced institute for TCs this past July.

While we realized what the needs of TCs were early on, deciding how to address those needs was not an easy process. In January, seven of us met over two days to discuss the pressing concerns and issues facing educators, especially high school educators who have been missing at our professional development offerings in recent years, and to look at current popular models of professional development. We also looked at what types of offerings GVWP currently had for high school educators and evaluated the effectiveness of each.

At the end of the two days, I felt both exhausted and invigorated. Our discussions ranged from dealing with the constant onslaught of mandates to the needs of teachers - many of us included - to be grounded in strong theorists like James Moffett and Jim Britton. We took time to familiarize ourselves with the ideas of lesson study, coaching, professional learning communities and inquiry and action circles. We also, thanks to Janet Lenards, were led to the work of Bob Garmston and his five energy sources: efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship, consciousness, and

interdependence. These, along with the idea of using protocols discussed in *The Power of Protocols*, formed the backbone of our future plans. Whatever we decided, both of these ideas would have to be included.

Slowly a plan emerged. We would invite TCs to come together during the summer to explore the what - the theory that we all need to re-visit - and the how - the models of professional development available to TCs to implement. As Carla Hanson put it, “It should be a place for us to share our best practices in the art of facilitation. There should be shared responsibility for leadership. It needs to feel like a collaboration of knowledge and experience.” We ordered some core texts for background material and started reading.

Six months later, we met again to re-visit our ideas, discuss our reading, and make the final plans. Again, I was exhausted and invigorated at the end of the three hours. Not unlike our two-day session, we practiced the protocols we wanted to implement during the three-day institute. These helped to keep us focused and to let us read the mood of the group.

Remembering our focus on the what and the how, we decided to devote one day to each of these. Monday, we would explore protocols, Garmston and Moffett. Tuesday would be our chance to spotlight different professional development models. Wednesday would be the day to put everything together and provide planning time so the TCs who attended could begin to put this all into practice. We would each take different pieces of the three days to lead allowing our own areas of expertise to be showcased. And, because we are the Writing Project, all three days would be filled with writing and reflecting. In order to keep a sense of uniformity, we decided to follow a format provided by Mary Dietz in *Journals as Frameworks for Change* that kept the key ideas of each presenter to one page. This

would provide an overview to which participants could later refer and which could serve as a starting point for further delving. By the time we left for lunch, I was certain our three-day institute would be a success.

By the end of the first day of the institute six weeks later, it already seemed clear that, indeed, success was imminent. As we’d planned, Tom O’Hara led the group through our selected opening protocols: we shared our hopes and fears for the three days and established norms to which we would all adhere. Together, these activities allowed individuals to voice any concerns they had and to create the rules as a collective whole rather than have them set by the leaders. This helped to create a culture of both honesty and community from the beginning. We wanted to send the message that everyone was expected to contribute in whatever way he or she saw fit, that opinions and ideas from everyone would be valued.

Creating this sense of culture was crucial to the success of the next piece of the day when Stephanie Paterson led us in a discussion of the ideas of James Moffett. Many of us found the reading challenging and needed to work through Moffett’s ideas together. This could only be possible in an environment where we felt safe to test our ideas and to admit when we didn’t understand.

We moved on then to a walk-through the uses of Mary Dietz’s *Journals as Frameworks for Change* led by Janet Lenards. First, Janet sent us writing as we thought about the needs of our own school cultures. She then explained Dietz’s ideas for how using journals with a group can help us meet these needs. This also helped participants to begin thinking about what the needs are in their departments, schools, and/or districts.

I led the final session of our first day introducing participants to Bob Garmston’s “Five States of Mind” through a jigsaw of his write-up in

leads to successful PLLA

Cognitive Coaching after reading an overview of each state from *The Presenter's Fieldbook: A Practical Guide*. Garmston's idea is that the states of efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship, consciousness, and interdependence "may be thought of as catalysts, energy sources, or passions that fuel human behavior." (*The Presenter's Fieldbook* 209) So thinking about these energy states after thinking about the needs of our schools left us ripe for the topics of our second day, professional development models. Which professional development model would best facilitate the development of the necessary states of mind in our colleagues so that we could begin to meet the needs of the school?

Day two kicked off with a revisit of our norms and a walk further into the world of Moffett through Stephanie's "Moffett Moment." We then began our individual quests for the perfect professional development model. Each presenter was given 45 minutes to provide participants with a taste of her model. With Debra Schneider, we were guided through an abridged Collaborative Assessment Conference following the protocols from "Looking at Student Work." I led the group through a mini-version of a lesson study. Carla had us write in order to understand the necessity of training students using the Improvement Rubric created by CWP's Improving Students' Academic Writing (ISAW) leadership group. Debra Boggs followed this by giving the group an overview of the work done with the CSU Early Assessment Program and how this connects with the Reading Institute for Academic Preparation she leads. Finally, Debra Scheider led us in a brainstorming discussion of powerful texts for teachers while explaining how to effectively run a book group. By the end of the day, we were exhausted.

But there was also a buzz in the room. Ideas had begun to fly. People

were writing notes back and forth to each other sharing thoughts and plans. It was sort of like a racehorse at the starting gate: the training had been down; now it was time to put that training into action.

The third day was all about synthesis beginning with our final Moffett moment. Stephanie had us take what we had learned through our reading and connect it to one of Moffett's quotes. This forced us to articulate what we had learned about his ideas in our own words. It was an exercise I found to be both challenging and empowering.

As we prepared to create our own plans for professional development, Carol Minner led us in a discussion of how we evaluate growth. She asked us to contemplate what proof we have that what we do works and how we describe what we do to someone who is not in education. This reminded us of the power of sharing what we do in a clear and concise way in order to increase our visibility as a project. It also led to the creation of a Visibility List: what could we do as educators to inform our campus communities of the power of the work we do?

Brandy de Alba followed this with a reminder to think about our EL students and the EL students of the teachers with whom we work. She walked us through a look at lesson plans and what changes could be made to better accommodate the needs of these students. Though perhaps unconsciously, this again was a reminder to think about the diverse needs of the teachers with whom we were preparing to work.

Finally, Tom shared with the group the ideas of finding consensus through dialogue according to William Isaacs' *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. To do this, Tom had us examine the key words respecting, voicing, listening, and suspending and the role each of these acts plays in dialogue.

In the remainder of the day (not nearly enough time), participants

worked to create plans for professional development they believed would meet the needs of their teachers and which they felt comfortable implementing during the school year. These were then shared with the whole group so that we could, for one final time, learn from each other as we each made our own preparations.

At the end of it all, I feel confident that both of our realized needs were met: TCs felt stretched in their new knowledge of both theory and professional development models and they left invigorated with new ideas of professional development to meet the needs of their campus communities. On top of it all, we found an added bonus, TCs who had never met connected while at the same time re-connecting to GVWP, thus strengthening our writing project. We all left more prepared to be effective "Teachers Teaching Teachers."

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Summer Institute experience pleasantly surprises new TC

by **Kate McCarthy**

I did not want to go. Tina Johansson and Sally Hale, project mentors, had been prompting me for three years. "You must go to the National Writing Project. You'd love it. They need special education teachers." I ignored them the first year, then applied and withdrew the application the second year. Finally, the third year rolled around. I needed to either stop being polite and say "no" or try it.

I complained to my friends that I've been teaching a long time. I'm old and cranky. I loved teaching writing when we could do writing workshops and the students could do meaningful, published work. Since No Child Left Behind rolled into town with its multiple choice fixation, pacing guides inspired by Procrustus, and poorly designed data analysis, most of the state sponsored trainings are about how to implement one size fits all programs. These treat students like mold in search of a magic stimulus that will transform them so they will earn those precious points pushing them into the proficient categories that shine so brightly on administrators' resumes. Life is too complex for these formulas and too short for me to waste a summer on them.

I was assured that this would be different. Teachers who love to write and teach students the love of writing design the National Writing Project. I took a risk, signed up, interviewed, and went to the first meeting. I was surprised by the diversity of grade levels and subject backgrounds of the participants.

One of the first writing prompts was to reflect on the experience of teaching writing to my special education resource students. My frustration with ten years of pressure to teach to a test that did not acknowledge learning handicaps came out in the following poem.

Breaking Into Prison

Teaching writing is like
breaking into prison.
My students served seven years,
and haven't experienced success.
They are marched through
exercises daily
at speeds that exhaust
and numb them.
Success is measured in inches.
How long does this have to be?
What is the minimum sentence
for a persuasive essay?
There is no parole,
The sentences keep expanding.
I sneak in the back way,
through the infirmary,
in the laundry cart.

After we finished writing, we were encouraged to share our reflections. After a few had read, I read my poem. I looked around the room and noticed several nodding heads, and a few smiles. Afterward, several teachers came up to tell me they agreed and were frustrated too. That was the moment that I knew this experience would be different. The dialog would be honest and pragmatic.

The sessions would always begin with our own written reflections. Then previous teacher mentor-consultants from different grade levels and disciplines would come to present a workshop on their best techniques. University professors who successfully taught writing offered research and educational theory that supported these practices. We wrote, listened, discussed, debated, and wrote some more. The gritty issues of teaching were addressed. How do I develop prompts that are meaningful and engage students? How do I address the many levels of ability in the class? What are the most useful forms of assessment? How do I keep up with the paperwork and still have a life? How do we make the rules of English grammar meaningful to students? How can we inspire our

students to write often and well?

One-by-one each of us put a presentation of our best practices together and offered it to the group. A first grade teacher showed us how a high level of structure and practice helped struggling students of any grade level. A geography teacher showed how projects of social action resulted in amazing student reflection and poetry. A high school history teacher delighted us with his Word of the Day exercises that led into the creation of remarkable memoirs. Several middle school teachers shared simple ways of teaching editing and conventions that improved student writing. I had a chance to share how using the thinking strategies developed by Edward DeBono for corporations energized writing in my special education classes. As the weeks passed we listened, we discussed, we debated, and began to apply what we learned from each other to our own teaching practices.

I did not want to go. Now I am thankful that I came to the Writing Project. Although it cut several weeks out of my summer I feel energized. I have more tools, a network of seasoned, successful colleagues, sound research, excellent resources, and a renewed sense of vocation. I am also writing again. As I review the news I also see some hope that NCLB is being critically reviewed by Congress, and modified to recognize the dynamic complexity of the classroom and each student. There is light. There is hope. Last week I went to the first faculty meeting, sat down at the eighth grade table and quietly said, "Javier, you have special insights into the English Learner experience that need to be shared. You must go to the National Writing Project! You would love it!"

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Kate McCarthy teaches sixth through eighth grade students at Glick Middle School. This is her first year as a TC with Great Valley Writing Project.

GVWP lands in Linden



by Stephanie Paterson

“I profoundly believe we need to work on the self that teaches.”
—Carla Hanson

Carla Hanson was one of several talented and dynamic Great Valley Writing Project teacher consultant kick-off speakers for the new school year in the Linden Unified School District. She dazzled a packed room of approximately 60 teachers and galvanized the group to meet new students in the upcoming school year.

The classroom I was in was filled with colorful banners advertising local universities and colleges and was populated with an eclectic mix of new and veteran teachers. Some donned sleeveless shirts and sported suntanned summer skin. The room buzzed with that nervous energy that exists when teachers come together after a summer apart to begin a new school year. I had the rare privilege of being the fly-on-the-wall participant-observer. I sat two rows behind a young teacher who wore a T-shirt advertising POLYGAMY PORTER, a stout beer from Park City, Utah.

Here are three highlights I took

away from Carla’s professional development workshop:

1) “Who you are as teachers, and what you do as teachers really matters”;

2) “We need to work on the self that teaches”;

3) [We need to] “Provide more bridges for students to move from personal to academic kinds of writing.”

I heard, “As teachers, you have the second most important job in the world. The most important job in the world would be parenting and many of you are also parents, which means that many in the room do both of the two most important jobs in the world.” And Carla added, and I wholeheartedly agree, “how so many of you manage

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In several different ways and at various intervals Carla reiterated her premise for the morning’s professional development workshop, that “as teachers, who you are is what you teach.”
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to do both jobs baffles me.”

In several different ways and at various intervals Carla reiterated her premise for the morning’s professional development workshop, that “as teachers, who you are is what you teach.” This statement was backed continually by the reminder that “who you are matters and what

you do really matters.” Participants were led through a meticulously sequenced three-hour demonstration that moved teachers from the personal--”shoot for 13 words to describe yourself” to the professional---”what sorts of professional development would you like to see offered at your school site?” Teachers began with personal lists of 13 attributes they believed characterized themselves as professionals. From there, Carla moved them to writing analytically about Anthony Gregorc’s, *Adult Guide to Style* indicators and an incredibly inspiring and motivating workshop that demonstrated the three I’s James Moffett believes are central to all good lessons---*individualized, interactive, and brilliantly integrated* instruction.

I noticed that the overall workshop theme was reinforced even in the final three minutes of reflection and feedback on the workshop as a whole, when participants were asked to respond to the following two focused prompts:

I valued:

I will commit to:

No doubt those present felt honored for their hard work in the profession, and they left with a sense of agency that they could affect positive change at their school site. From the Linden teachers in their own words,

* “One of the best in-services I have attended in my 28 years of teaching. Thank you.”

* “Wonderful way to start off a new school year.”

* “Bravo!”

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Stephanie Paterson is the Co-Director of the Great Valley Writing Project. She is also an Assistant Professor of English at CSU Stanislaus.

Students use writing to better understand themselves

by Tom O'Hara and Debra Schneider

“Senior Odyssey has helped me learn more about who I am and who I want to be...Senior Odyssey led me on a journey of self discovery through writing, poetry, and discussions, and the help of all of my classmates...Write every day. You'll be happy you did!” Our students wrote these comments in letters to next year's classes, and through reading them, we have come to see that Senior Odyssey fills an important need for our students. For five years, seniors at West High in Tracy have been able to sign up for an elective designed for seniors only, Senior Odyssey. The course was originally designed by Carla Hanson, a GVWP Teacher Consultant and master English teacher, to help seniors answer two burning questions: Who Am I? and Where Am I Going? After three years, Carla left West High to teach in another district, but the course lived on, by student demand! We became the course instructors.

The name of the course mirrored an on-going tension in class between students and teachers: should it be about being a senior, wallowing in senior experiences, reveling in one's "Senior-ness"? Or should the course focus on moving forward, taking off on a journey, away from high school and into the future? To help us deal with this tension, we added two more focus questions to put less focus on "senior" and more focus on "odyssey." We explore the four questions in this order through the year: Who Am I? Who Do I Want to Be? What Does It Mean to be Grown Up? and Where Am I Going?

Because of its focus, the content of Senior Odyssey is the lived experience of those in the class (including the teacher). As we tell them, the curriculum is YOU. This created a potential problem: how can we build rapport and connectedness

among students, instead of having an individuality-free-for-all? Our experiences in the Great Valley Writing Project showed us how to structure a class around many different students, and their various lives, experiences, and futures: use lots of writing and reading.

Each day begins with the same daily schedule of activities: someone reads the log from the last class meeting, everyone writes in her or his journal and then volunteers share, and then one student presents a Show and Tell, about an important object, text excerpt, song or picture; it varies each quarter. One day, as we talked about the consistency and meanings of these daily activities, Jenae exclaimed, "Hey, this is like kindergarten!" and Maggie answered, "Nah, we're seniors. Wait, this is AP Kindergarten!" The name stuck, which is funny, because this is the only "AP" class most of our students will ever attempt: they are a true mix of the school's different ability groups.

After the introductory activities, students work through a variety of themes and activities during the year, always starting and ending with writing. In the first quarter, students answer "Who Am I?" by using autobiographical writing to express themselves and learn about each other, culminating in a class anthology of memoirs. To answer "Who Do I Want to Be?" the seniors do values clarification exercises, run class discussions, interview adults in their lives, and create mission statements and life maps for themselves. In the third quarter, students explore theories about life stages, assertiveness training, and learn ways to deal with strong emotions, since these feelings are coming up more and more as their senior year is running down. They write about these in "coming of age" stories. Finally, in the fourth quarter,

the students investigate personal autonomy, legal responsibilities for 18 year olds, decision-making, and write poetry to express themselves in their final scary weeks of their high school years. Our most popular activity in the last quarter has been a lesson we learned from a NWP colleague, something we call "Guerilla Poetry." Students write poems about high school experiences that can be connected to a particular location on campus. On one day, all the course sections roam around campus putting up their poems with spray adhesive and tape. The poems are anonymous (students' names are only on the copy the teacher keeps) and posted between classes, hence "guerilla." Within a few hours or days, the poems are gone: the wind and rain expose the transient nature of the poetry and of the experiences that inspired them. Students seem to take that as a sign to begin letting go. We-and our students-were delighted to find non-Senior Odyssey students reading the poems during and even after school, and many of our colleagues wrote messages to the students to praise them for their thought-provoking writing, while students wrote back with their reflections about the project.

Over the year, our seniors come to see the wisdom and power of using writing for a variety of purposes that benefit and heal them: to describe their lives to classmates, to RSVP for a book discussion group or thank the leader after the group, to take a public stand on values or a life's mission, and to give words to strong feelings and reflect on their thinking and learning so that they can better express themselves in life.

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In addition to being TCs for the Great Valley Writing Project, Tom O'Hara and Debra Schneider both teach history at West High School in Tracy.

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In Print, the Great Valley Writing Project newsletter, is edited by Juliet Wahleithner. Comments or concerns can be directed to juliet@wahleithner.com.