School reform initiatives call for teachers’ professional development to become embedded in teachers’ work day, not isolated in in-service days or summer workshops. This means rethinking the definition of “teacher’s work” as not just working directly with students, but as also working collaboratively to plan and assess students’ work. We’ve tried to accomplish this in our professional learning community (PLC) at West High, with some problems and some successes.

Our group did not “spring forth from the head of Zeus” fully formed. It developed and changed over time, by taking advantage of opportunities as they arose at West. It started with teachers’ involvement in Reading Institute for Academic Preparation sponsored by GVWP. A RIAP-colleague at our site proposed to administration that we be allowed to make our RIAP group—and our assessment work in it—a WASC goal group, as our campus went through its most recent accreditation. Since our RIAP focus was to learn to use a collection instrument to assess our students’ reading skills, we were assigned to the WASC Goal Group that studied how to “use disaggregated data to make decisions.” This was a good fit and we were able to design and practice using assessment tools to identify what skills our students needed.

During that first year, our focus shifted a bit, to finding ways to make our students self-aware of their skills, their growth and the goals they needed to accomplish academic reading. Our work attracted a few other teachers interested in the same goals, from the English and Social Studies departments.

In our second year, when the district initiated data teams at our site, we asked to keep meeting in our group, employing our focus on using data collection and interpretation as our rationale. As a group, we agreed that each time the district or site set aside time for us to do WASC or data team work, we would meet in our PLC. Influenced by what we learned from our GVWP colleagues in Professional Leadership Learning Academy (PLLA) and CWP’s Improving Student Academic Writing, we shifted focus again, to investigating students’ academic reading and writing skills. We attracted a few more new members who wanted to explore academic reading and writing with their students.

Last year, we met during WASC and data team times set aside by the district and site to continue our work. We started the year by listing our hopes and fears for the work we were doing together (a protocol we experienced in the GVWP’s PLLA), then we used that information to create group norms. We post these hopes, fears and norms at each meeting and allow revisions. Together, we established an agenda of topics we wanted to explore. We read scholarly works about academic reading and writing, investigated rubrics, learned ways of looking at student work and then assessed student work using a collaborative assessment protocol. We have shared successful teaching strategies. Next, we plan to investigate prompt-writing and successful revision strategies.

Not everything has gone smoothly. At first, group members were not sure how much to trust that we really would be left alone to create our own agendas, do our own work and pursue our group’s interests. It took three to four meetings before people began to feel comfortable and trusting about getting to work on our agenda. Sometimes, we have been charged with doing work from a district or site agenda, but no one has forced us to give up our own focus, just set it aside occasionally.

A bigger problem is the patchwork schedule: it has made it very difficult to create momentum for our work. We may meet for two weeks in a row, then not again for six weeks. Restarting after a long break keeps us from getting much work done in any one meeting, as we struggle to catch up to where we last left off.

And how to use meeting time has been a struggle. Because we have different needs in our classroom work, we do not always agree on the best ways to use the work time: in large group sharing or smaller team
Thinking more effectively about our obsessions

by Stephanie Paterson

Natalie Goldberg has it right in Writing Down the Bones when she devotes one whole section of her book to the topic of obsessions. She says we all have them—and I know I do, whether it’s the thought of the last three pieces of dark Ghiradelli squares I have squirreled away in my sandwich bag drawer or more global obsessions like my passion for books or for the just-right pen to use for writing. Goldberg says we ought to mine our obsessions and not try to look away from them or pretend they don’t exist, because obsessions have power. Goldberg suggests listing our obsessions to generate ideas for new material, to get them down on paper to see and review.

So here are two of my obsessions. If you have attended a Summer Institute in the last five years, you’ll know that I have lobbied for teachers to read two powerful pieces, an essay, written by the late James Moffett, entitled, “Liberating Inner Speech” and an article by Sheridan Blau, entitled, “Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers.” I have lost track of how many times I have read both of these pieces. “Liberating Inner Speech” was written during the mid-sixties when Moffett was working as a freelance curriculum developer. It was later published in Coming on Center: Essays in English Education (1981, 1988) a collection of expository essays, never intended to be part of a book. They “naturally cohered because of a certain unity and continuity” in Moffett’s own preoccupations or, more to the point—obsessions (Preface). In his opening, Moffett explains, “The bulk of this writing...[includes] practical teacher talk or analysis of learning principles that aim to help educators think more effectively about what they are doing” (Preface, italics added). Sheridan Blau’s piece about “Performative Literacy” was first published in Voices from the Middle, but is also in The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers (2003).

Together in these two brief publications, I now realize that... •

“Like all of us, students are thinking about only certain things, and those things only in certain ways. Their patterns of limitation have been laid down by their own fear and desire, on the one hand, and by social inculcation, on the other. This is what I call obsession. To think of new things, and of old things in new ways, they will need to start with something familiar and go somewhere with it they haven’t been before. The composition process can be this kind of mental trip, a development of ideas not merely determined by one’s limitations.”


Moffett and Blau provide a “what” and a “so what” for my own writing curriculum. Moffett presents a compelling problem (we are all imprisoned by inner speech) and a deceptively simple solution (composing) and Blau offers the inner habits of mind that will fortify an individual to meet any writing challenges (and I would add any life challenges) head on.

If you would like a refreshing new way to view what you do in the classroom as literacy educators, I recommend that you read both pieces. Don’t read either piece for quick answers. Neither offers a lesson plan for the pinch you might face in preparing for Monday morning.

Moffett’s non-linear essay offers an inside peek at a great mind at work and play. It is rich in allusions and references to other texts and traditions. It is a true essay in the sense that it tells the story of Moffett’s thinking and experience. The piece meanders the way the mind naturally meanders, making disparate connection and pulling different sources together to make a point. The purpose of this mental trip is to argue that the majority of our communication problems are caused by our egocentricity; I think it is probably safe to say this is true for students and teachers alike. We are trapped by our own inner speech and writing is the ticket out of self-made prisons or limiting perceptions.

The Moffett reading is not for the faint of heart, and I have found that if reading Moffett is like running a marathon, to live the Moffett curriculum is to take the Iron Man Challenge. Which is why I have come to rely on another Writing Project maverick educator—Sheridan Blau and his seven traits of “performative” or “personal” literacy, because I find they offer some comfort and staying power, both in the complex processes of writing and reading deeply and on the road of life, more generally speaking. Blau contends that seven traits are “essential to functioning as a fully enfranchised reader in the 21st century schools” (Blau 19). They include the following:

• a capacity for sustained, focused attention;
• a willingness to suspend closure;
• a willingness to take risks;
• a tolerance for failure;
• a tolerance for ambiguity, paradox,
ut our aims in teaching writing

“Like the novelist, the student needs to get going a continuity of thought that rides him or her right out beyond the confines of personal inner speech, to self-surprise.”


and uncertainty;
• intellectual generosity…and
• metacognitive awareness” (Blau 211).

I list these as learning objectives in my classes, so students become explicitly aware that these are the “enabling forms of knowledge” that we aim toward (Blau 19).

I now make a point to introduce composing in the context of these habits of mind. Students in my classes approach writing as a process (“a willingness to suspend closure”). They are taught to believe they don’t have to write a polished, perfected first draft (“a tolerance for failure”). Sometimes a first draft just barely makes an argument, so students experiment with “radical revision” or reorganizing a piece of writing to highlight the insights that occurred in the initial act of composing (“a willingness to take risks”). They read each others’ texts and offer critical responsive feedback (“intellectual generosity”). I provide frequent opportunities to reflect on readings and to reflect on what is required of them as they shift to meet the demands of different genres (“metacognitive awareness”).

Going back to Moffett, what he says in “Liberating Inner Speech” is that there is a correlation between composing and composure. When you learn to write you are also learning to discipline and train the mind in all sorts of ways.

Moffett lists four ways that composing, itself, can be intrinsically liberating. Here are four factors of composing that “liberate our inner speech” by surprising our habitual thought patterns: 1) we write for audiences which requires imagining others’ points of view which inevitably stretches thinking, requiring the writer to widen his/her vision; 2) we compose in different genres with characteristics independent of the writer so that learning to write in each new genre subjects our inner speech “to conditions not of its own making” which causes our inner speech “to alter itself” (179); 3) we inevitably revise and “this recursive scanning [also] alters thinking” (179); and 4) compositions are constructions. Moffett explains, “In writing, one parcels out, rearranges, and reformulates the inner life in ways that change its native state” (179).

This is a lot to digest, I know. When I, or my students start to feel overwhelmed I return to the list:
1. a capacity for sustained focused attention.
2. Willingness to suspend closure—to entertain problems rather than avoid them (Blau 19).

In my classes, I spend some time emphasizing the importance of titles. I believe the just right title can accomplish a lot of the work of the writing. When I introduce first-year college students to Moffett’s essay I ask, “what do you think is meant by this title?” The title alone is a sufficient inquiry question to sustain...
Professional development is often a let down. Teachers do not dare count the hours spent at professional development conferences, workshops, and seminars since many prove to be a disappointment. At best, you give up a Saturday or week night, drive to a nearby college campus or school, and sit passively for a few hours while you listen to someone pitch a fool-proof approach, or book. At best, you walk away with one or two decent ideas you can modify to fit your classroom. At worst, you tell yourself at least the snacks were decent and your administrator will be pleased you attended.

The sessions were practical, casual, and to the point. No one was selling anything. The presenters simply discussed and modeled their approaches. We did not sit passively. Our group wrote, discussed, and contributed along with the presenter. We were given time to reflect and discuss the approach. We weren’t observers, we were participants.

At last, I had found some meaningful professional development. I attended all five sessions of the seminar and that led to being selected as a summer fellow in the Invitational Institute, a month-long session made up of 14 area teachers from a wide range of grade levels. A great element of the GVWP summer institute was that everyone participating was there by choice. No administrators were making them attend. No one was logging hours and clock watching. No one was phoning it in for units or cash (despite GVWP offering both for our commitment).

I can best describe the month-long process as equally draining and invigorating (I mean this in a positive way). For the first time in my teaching career, I was surrounded by a group of colleagues who shared a similar teaching philosophy. We spent the month writing for pleasure, researching and discussing areas of academic interest, and sharing our own classroom approaches. I also took great pleasure in the numerous side conversations that were born from larger group discussions. I came away from the institute mentally exhausted and with more ideas than my mind has been able to process. (Again, I mean that in a positive way).

It has been over three months since the Summer Institute, yet I am still revisiting my notes and materials from the experience. I also have a stack of curriculum, instruction, and methodology books I am slowly working my way through.

Until the Great Valley Writing Project Summer Institute, I had never experienced such creative and professional growth. I left the institute with an abundance of new ideas and relationships with people who inspire me. I am not the first to say this, but it is worth repeating: Great Valley works because it is teacher-led. It is not selling a particular approach or idea. It is collaborative and interactive. It provides a supportive environment to research and reflect.

Phil Stepping teaches English at Linden High School. His demonstration titled, “English Learners Find Their Voices,” explored how to design meaningful and relevant writing approaches.
SI offers self discovery for kindergarten teacher

by Sharon Burnett

During the first few days of the GVWP Summer Institute, I have to admit that I was wondering to myself “What do I, a kindergarten teacher, have to offer all these people?” Yet, on the day of my presentation several weeks later, I was empowered by these same people – my peers – as they applauded what I do as a kindergarten teacher. They told me how they would use what I had presented in their own classrooms – even the middle school and high school teachers! This was such a validating experience. I found that, as teachers of kindergarten through high school students, we had so much more in common than I had thought possible just days earlier. These teachers also gave me constructive criticism and great suggestions on how I could make my presentation better so that it would be more meaningful in future presentations to other teachers. Teachers teaching teachers – the model of the Great Valley Writing Project in action!

As the weeks went by we laughed together and even shed a few tears together as we shared what we had written – our personal experiences, our own individual philosophies on life and teaching, and even some poetry. We grew as writers as we honed our skills and gave each other feedback. We had incredible discussions after reading the thought-provoking research articles that had been chosen where we discussed how we would implement the ideas we learned in our own classrooms. By the end of our four weeks together, we had shared our personal lives and our experiences as teachers. I think we all discovered that as dedicated teachers we had a lot in common. We all shared the same goals for our students – to help each of them reach their full potential as learners and to get them turned on by writing.

GVWP: a mature site with a growing reputation

by Carol Minner

According to NWP’s recent research brief, the writing improvements of students whose teachers participated in NWP professional development exceeded those of students who were not participants. In nine independent national studies, NWP found that student writing improved in every measured attribute such as development of ideas, organization and conventions.

Our own evaluations comparing pre/post writing samples of English learners’ and Migrant Ed students’ writing also show increases in all attributes. For the past five years, our TCs have studied and practiced how best to teach ELs. (See Chris Condon’s evaluation in this edition). From these teaching experiences at EL writing academies, our teacher consultants have created new demonstrations and written articles that showcase a deeper understanding of how to effectively teach English learners. Our work has attracted NWP recognition, and for the past three years, our TCs have been invited to share our site’s EL work at NWP Annual Meetings. Our site has earned the reputation as a mature site, “providing an excellent balance of professional development, continuity and outreach programs.”

In our next NWP funding proposal, our TCs will report on the high quality programs offered in ’07-’08 and set goals for ’09-’10.

GVWP teacher leaders deserve kudos for creating and facilitating 57 programs for 668 educators and 1,138 students, parents and community members for a total of 24,701 contact hours. It’s been a productive year from July ’07 to June ’08 thanks to our vibrant network of teacher leaders.

Carol Minner is the Director of Great Valley Writing Project. She is a newly-retired teacher looking forward to devoting her energy to developing GVWP’s capacity to serve Region Six.

Sharon Burnett teaches kindergarten at Whitmore Charter School in Ceres where she helps her students discover their voices in writing.
TC leads by example as coach, new teacher

by Janet Lenards

“It’s our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”
-Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

I was not born a teacher. I didn’t pursue the profession in high school nor in college. Instead, I became a teacher after having worked in another field for over 20 years. In my first year of teaching I struggled with many of the same issues that all new teachers struggle with: classroom management, curriculum, meeting standards and preparing students for the STAR tests. It is how we face those challenges that determine what kind of a teacher we become.

For me, as I struggled those first few months of teaching, I was guided gently by a caring teacher who reached out and suggested that I attend a free Saturday workshop being offered by the Great Valley Writing Project. The job was already overwhelming my home life, with papers to grade in the evenings and lessons to plan each weekend, but I decided to attend the Saturday workshop because I knew I needed help engaging my students. The short three-hour session stimulated both my lesson book and my passion for teaching. I came away that first Saturday with strategies I could use the following Monday. I began looking forward to watching my students engage in activities that were both fun and relevant.

That first year I attended each monthly Saturday workshop. It was like a day at the spa for me. After a long week of teaching I spent three hours being a student, remembering how much I love to learn, working through the activities as a participant and then putting them into practice in my own classroom. I was put in the student’s desk, and I was paying attention to how I was learning; what helped me to understand a concept better; how to break down and “chunk” the content into manageable pieces for my students.

These “spa days” made me more enthusiastic about teaching. I was able to meet a variety of teachers. Some were new, like me, but many were veterans. Each time I attended a workshop I found myself sitting beside teachers who were equally curious about new ways to make learning meaningful to their students. Together we shared what was going on in our classrooms, who our students were and how to connect our content to their world.

In the staff lounge, while talking to my colleagues, I began to share both my enthusiasm for the art of teaching as well as the idea that we all have something to learn from each other. I asked questions; I listened. I was lucky to have landed my first job in a school where teachers supported each other so warmly. I knew that the direction of my practice had been greatly influenced by a gentle nudge from a veteran teacher and so I tried to pass that nudge on to others. Always gently.

During those two years of coaching, I watched teachers move from working in isolation, afraid that a fellow teacher would see them doing something wrong to literally opening their doors and feeding off each other. This was the model I was exposed to over and over again through GVWP- teachers teaching teachers. And it works. The teachers I worked with as a coach began sharing ideas, admitting to difficulties and working together to offer support and alternatives.

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Dear Supportive Scribe:
Adair Lara says you know you’re a writer when, “You’ve wanted to be a writer since Mrs. Burnett tacked your Christmas poem to the bulletin board in the third grade.” I’ve created a writing bulletin board for my own classroom, but correcting students’ work with a red pen has given me carpal tunnel syndrome! Temporarily robbed of my ability to show my students the error of their ways, I don’t know what to do next. Should I claim workmen’s comp or sue Ms. Lara for false advertising?

Rudolph the Red
Marked Reindeer

Dear Red:
I, too, once wielded a stern pen as a vigilant officer of the prose police. My red ink flowed as freely as my students’ casual use of punctuation. Then a colleague reminded me that bleeding as a method to staunch wounds belongs to the Middle Ages. Believe me, my dear, the choice before you goes far deeper than whether to file a workmen’s comp claim or a lawsuit. Choice must be available to your students as well.

As Nancie Atwell explains in her book, In the Middle, “Freedom of choice does not undercut structure.” The structure you want to build with your students is the foundation for a lifelong love of writing. Where, you may wonder, can you work with teacher and student writers in a collaborative environment? What experience will allow you to see first-hand the benefits of a writing workshop? How can you study specific instructional strategies and classroom management tools that don’t involve a red pen? At the Build a Better Workshop! So reitre the red pen, my dear, and join a community of writers who won’t leave you seeing red.

GVWP’s “Build A Better Workshop” is an advanced course where teachers learn to help students assume greater responsibility for their own writing and learning. Each May, participating teachers join long-term study groups to read research and discuss ideas about teaching writing. In the summer, they attend a three-week workshop to observe demonstration lessons and practice new techniques with real students. During the following school year, participants come together to discuss implementation, reflect on classroom experiences, analyze outcomes, and receive helpful feedback from supportive team members.

CSU Stanislaus offers six units for the 90-hour course; with advisor approval, course credit may be applied toward a master’s program. All teachers receive a $500 budget for instructional materials and professional development.

Genevieve Beltran teaches third grade at Lathrop Elementary School. She helped facilitate the 6-8th grade Build-a-Better-Workshop this year.

Students interact with peers

by Barbara Damewood

My Great Valley Writing Project “Build a Better Workshop” experience this past summer gave me a most helpful insight. This insight was that the interaction among the participants was the key that helped improve student writing. As the students interacted and became involved with each other’s writing, I could see that it helped to improve their own. A writing piece no longer was held at arm’s length. As the writer became more introspective about what was being written, she was forming a relationship with the writing. It is almost like having a conversation with her own words.

As the writer responds to her writing and is responded to by others, the piece is brought close and intimate. Its different parts are scrutinized; words and ideas are thought about in a new way. As the writer becomes more alive and energized, so does the writing. Voice is interjected, as interest in writing is sparked.

Deep thought about a student’s writing is also fostered. Through self-revision and peer-conferencing about an individual’s writing, new understanding and perspectives are reached. A writer can then approach her piece with “fresh eyes.” New awareness is generated, and the student’s writing becomes even deeper and broader.

The process of student-conferencing not only helps the student towards a fresh perspective on the writing, it also helps promote self-honesty and builds trust with other students. In this supportive environment, honesty toward an individual’s writing and toward one another is promoted and encouraged.

This safety net of the community inspires the writer to higher achievement. It is this safety net, too, that provides the writer with training wheels to experiment with words, thoughts, and different styles of writing. It is the community that fosters confidence and ultimately self-reliance.

The community is the vehicle that carries the fledgling writer through interactive communication. There are experts within the community who meet the needs of every writer in it. Writers who seek to improve their skills by expanding ideas can meet with and brainstorm with “idea” experts. A student who wishes to improve in the area of sentence

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The Measure of Success and the Value of Measure: Evaluating the Writing of English Language Learners in Great Valley Writing Project’s EL Young Writers Academies

by Chris Condon

So many times this last summer when I visited one of GVWP’s seven Young Writers Academies for English Language Learners, I found myself pausing to observe some activity where students were deeply engaged, perhaps talking about a storyboard they were creating, sharing ideas about the best word to describe a character, or illustrating a book of their writing for publishing. I found myself wondering how to capture these events as they occurred, measuring their success, validating their worth, and underpinning their benefits. These students loved what they were doing, and it showed. But of course, the real beauty of such phenomena, which I saw day after day in all kinds of instructional settings, was that these students were too engrossed in their work to bother with such notions of capturing and measuring—they were too busy being writers.

Although the very idea that someone could quantify spontaneous creativity and dynamic social interaction is perhaps misdirected, the use of writing assessment scores to quantify improvement in student writing is not. Such data provide a critical perspective that would confirm that the students’ engagement and excitement in creating purposeful, meaningful writing has value. My qualitative observations would benefit from such a quantitative perspective; the one validates the other. Indeed, when combined with an overall description of the theoretical foundation, best teaching practices, and shared philosophy that guides the academies, the quantitative results become an invaluable ally. They verify student growth while simultaneously reflecting what I saw during my visits—the high quality of teaching and learning exemplified throughout the EL Writers Academies. This combination of qualitative descriptors with quantitative results has been the foundation of GVWP’s annual evaluation of the summer EL writing academies from the beginning.

To best evaluate evidence of student growth in writing skills, a Pre- and Post-Academy writing assessment has been given each year. The same prompt was used for both assessments, helping to ensure that any changes in scores would reflect development of student writing skills and not the potential variability of the writing prompt. Each participating EL student’s writing assessment was scored and the final results averaged and compared pre- and post- for evidence of growth, both for total score and for each criterion. The scoring session occurred late summer after the Writing Academies had ended. Participating Teacher Consultants met to share and discuss effective instructional strategies, celebrate successes, and brainstorm recommendations for the next year. Subsequently, the writing assessment was scored. Once results were tabulated, a one-page evaluation summary of Pre- and Post-Academy assessment results, including a brief description of the theoretical base and instructional philosophy, was published for each academy site, thereby allowing GVWP and district administrators to discuss outcomes specific to their respective sites.

The chart above summarizes the combined writing assessment results for the EL Young Writers Academies for 2008. Using a four-point rubric that assessed five separate criteria (for a total of 20 points possible), a total mean gain of +2.1 points was evident. Graph 1 displays average gain in scores for each criterion (Narrative Structure and Development: +0.57; Word Choice: +0.47; Sentence Fluency: +0.41; Voice: +0.39; Conventions: +0.27; Total Gain: +2.1). The use of testing in education (including its potential misuse) has become increasingly controversial in recent years, with nation-wide (though state-specific), year-end, high stakes continued on page 11
by Frances Chamberlain

What does it mean to be a teacher consultant (TC) with the Great Valley Writing Project? What types of things do I participate in after the Institute? The Invitational Institute is such a life-altering experience that it is sometimes difficult to imagine what is next. As a teacher consultant for GVWP, I am compelled to describe my experiences after the Institute and to express the way my vision of writing guided me to many interesting places. It is a journey, but we are always reminded that GVWP is a professional home. It really is.

When was the beginning of my journey? In retrospect, I believe it all started 22 years ago when I was 12. My friend, Heather, read poetry to me one day from a letter that she wrote to me the night before. I cannot explain that moment exactly, but an inexplicable energy filled me. That day, I wrote my first poem. From that day on, I continued to write with fervor each day. That was the moment when I became a poet and a writer. I share this with you because the directions and paths that I took after the Institute are directly related to who I am as a person. My vision started when I became a writer.

I consider the Institute one of the defining moments for me both personally and professionally. I think most people will agree that the Institute changes the lens that you use when teaching writing. We don’t always talk about how our affiliation with GVWP opens doors to many exciting experiences. I traveled through my GVWP itinerary gradually.

My first stop was the Young Writer’s Symposium (YWS) at Modesto Junior College, which is held annually and which showcases the best teaching practices of TCs throughout the county. I presented for the first time at this event. I still remember bringing along a few students from my district and presenting a demonstration on journalistic writing. I was excited and enervated by the experience, which next led to a Writing Club that I started at my school site.

The Writing Club featured creative writing lessons about the craft and writing experiences that no student will ever forget. There were days when imagery would creep into our muses, and we wrote and expressed ourselves with color and with eloquence. Those days were golden. I still run a Writing Club at my school site. Each year in my district, the number of young writers grows. Writing Clubs help build communities of writers. I am lucky to be a part of a growing district that keeps building schools, and these programs have become traditions that I pass on to the students and to the community.

After the flurry of a school year ended, I began to make plans for an Author’s Camp during that summer. I coordinated a week-long writing workshop with another TC, and we created yet another way for students to express themselves through writing.

In addition, I was already working at the district level as well, where I started a District Writing Committee that led to district writing rubrics, writing assessments, and better writing programs. I am still the District Chair of the Writing Committee and a member of the District Curriculum Council. I lead a group that seeks to improve the writing of young children in our district. Continuing to work at different levels has given me more perspectives and more understanding of the educational infrastructure in our nation.

While running these programs, I decided to add to them by working at the county level where I delivered presentations for other teachers. I also participated in and then coordinated a three-week writing program for teachers in Manteca. I am also facilitating a district book study group where teachers read, reflect, and write about research-based teaching strategies that can be applied to the classroom. I also attended a Professional Learning Leadership Academy (PLLA) during the summer of 2007 and learned new ways to serve as a TC leader. All these professional development opportunities helped me find my way as a TC. The next step for me was to take the opportunity to see writing in education at the state level.

I submitted an application to serve on a range-finding panel in Sacramento in 2006. The information was posted on the GVWP website and was passed on to me by the superintendent from my district. A significant portion of the application was based on affiliation with various groups outside of the district. There was also a section on the writing experiences of the applicant. Because of my involvement as a TC with GVWP, I believe, I was selected to serve on this panel. Range-finding is a means to decide two things – anchor papers for the state writing tests and application of the state rubric to the writing responses of our students. The experience made an impact on me because it demystified state testing in many ways. I saw how the state works in making decisions about the tests that affect us all in education. I served on the panel again in 2007, and in the summer of 2007, I also participated in an Item Writing Training event in Long Beach. This training taught participants how to write actual items on the state’s standardized tests. Of course, I was in the English/Language Arts (ELA) group where my understanding of the state’s expectations developed even more. After that event, I submitted my resume and writing samples to a company that is responsible for a part of the state’s standardized testing programs. I am now beginning consultant work with this company. Hopefully, this will give me even more insight into the world of standardized testing.

Meanwhile, I am reviewing

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teacher practices but more about the assigning teacher until the end. Groups, with little or no input from the work in small, cross-departmental together, we examined and discussed the breakthrough. Each teacher brought steps.html) gave us our first real moment it was not my ability, or my feelings of inexperience.

Teachers have felt empowered by their participation in the group, commenting on their enjoyment of this sustained, intellectual engagement in the real issues of teaching and learning.

Using a collaborative assessment protocol for looking at student work (http://www.lasw.org/CAC_steps.html) gave us our first real breakthrough. Each teacher brought an example of student work and together, we examined and discussed the work in small, cross-departmental groups, with little or no input from the assigning teacher until the end. Our discussions were rich with observations and questions for all of the teachers in the group, about teacher practices but more about

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Lenards, continued from page 6

considerably older, smarter and I felt like a fraud. Did I know this curriculum well enough to teach it? Yikes! Shakespeare! Everything in my world was new. I was overwhelmed. On top of this, I was asked to sit in on the Literacy Committee and help develop the next Staff Development workshops. I was being identified as a teacher leader, but at the moment all I wanted to do was to close my door and get a handle on my curriculum. I recognized that I was struggling, so within the school I located teachers who had participated in GVWP workshops and found they were sympathetic to my frustrations and willing to help with ideas and strategies. Reaching out and asking for help, I began to get my footing again. Forgotten strategies resurfaced. I felt supported by my fellow teachers. By chance, toward the end of my first term I was asked to fill in as the host for a GVWP Saturday Seminar. It had been a year or so since I had attended a workshop, but the attributes that I found so rewarding my first years of teaching were still being presented one Saturday each month. Participating with the rest of the teachers, I left the workshop with new ideas and a renewed confidence. This time the effect was like going to a filling station and feeling full and ready for a new journey.

As I found myself struggling in front of the classroom it seemed ironic that I was being identified in my new school as a teacher leader. At that moment it was not my ability, or my evidence.

Finally, we are proud to have created stronger interdepartmental relationships at West; members in the group would like more departments to have PLC participants.

Some group members have been motivated by the work we do together to suggest departmental and school-wide changes that would support more academic reading and writing. Two ideas we have just started to discuss are to create a humanities “school within a school” to focus on history through academic reading and writing, a kind of Writing Academy; and to give students struggling with writing two periods of Social Studies, one with a content focus and one with an academic reading and writing related to the content learning. Whether or not these ideas come to pass, group members are committed to continue our investigation of students’ work in academic reading and writing.

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Tom O’Hara and Debra Schneider both teach history at West High School in Tracy.

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Programs like the Saturday Series give teachers the confidence to reflect on what we do in our classrooms.

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Janet Lenards teaches at Sierra High School in Manteca Unified and coached at the ’08 Summer Institute.
us for a fifteen-week semester. In response to my opening questions I receive a range of interpretations. We begin the long process of thinking out loud together as a community of inquirers. Moffett gives us a question worth pondering, because it is a question that involves each of us in very personal and important ways involving the nature of our own minds, which is our greatest tool or greatest liability, and Moffett in essence says—you choose.

When I think about the larger curriculum in my writing classes, I think about how important it is that my students have a meta-awareness that enables them to articulate the
skills and processes we are learning. Equally powerful and important is to have the critical distance to step out of habitual thinking, actions, and inner speech (the things we tell ourselves about ourselves no matter how accurate or inaccurate) because sometimes our habits lead to stasis. If you are an educator, who has your eye on growth and who continually asks: Where is there change in my students? Change in myself and in my thinking? Change in my classroom? Then I recommend that you read these two pieces.

Works Cited


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

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fluency can interact with someone who has expertise in that area of writing. English language learners can meet with other students who have gone through similar language learning experiences. These learners might even develop a relationship with an older, more “writing experienced” mentor. All the workshop experiences a student has serves to expand awareness with writing and the expertise of the writing student.

I am so thankful that I attended the Great Valley Writing Project’s “Build A Better Workshop” this past summer. How was I led to this wonderful workshop? It was surely divine intervention, in the form of the warm, supportive relationships I had developed at the Great Valley Writing Project Summer Institute. Bit by bit, I have developed myself and my teaching strategies to meet and to communicate with the needs of each of my students as writers.

One of the most powerful ways this has happened is in the process of allowing the writing of all my students to be validated. When the students read their completed work to their classmates in “Author’s Chair,” and receive positive feedback from their peers, they begin to see that what they think about and reveal through writing is important. When students see their writing valued, they begin to value it themselves.

It is wonderful to view the

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testing being especially scrutinized and debated. Many opposing points of view have been taken. Hence, it is important to place GVWP’s Pre- and Post-Academy writing assessment in perspective. The value of the EL Young Writers Academies is not truly captured by assessment results, which have nevertheless consistently shown significant gains in student writing skills for six consecutive years. The fact is, when EL students are deeply immersed in the academies’ social-emotional learning process, and as they become motivated and engaged learners, their writing becomes a profound expression of their lives, including personal experiences, family and friends, beliefs and concerns. Planning and conducting the academies and evaluating the results cannot be a strictly prescriptive, lockstep, right-wrong, pass-fail endeavor. The test does not drive the curriculum. The inspiration to write is primary, and the passion for learning that is so obvious to the observer cannot be fully captured by a number.

Please come and visit one of the Great Valley Writing Project’s Young Writers Academies for English Language Learners next summer. You’ll see for yourself a passion for writing that is immeasurable.

Chris Condon serves as EL Coordinator and Evaluator for GVWP.
Chamberlain, continued

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articles for two publications, California English (California Association of Teacher’s of English affiliation) and Classroom Notes Plus (National Council of Teacher’s of English affiliation). I read prospective articles and provide feedback to the editors and to the publication developers. My involvement in all these events and endeavors fit me as a writer and as an educator. All these experiences will help pave the way to my professional and personal future. It is my intention to share my experiences with new TCS, so that they will also begin to create a path for themselves. My suggestion to interested TCS is to embark on their journey with an eye towards professional and personal meaning. This will lead you to satisfaction, happiness, and passion.

Frances Chamberlain teaches seventh grade at Wicklund Elementary School in Mountain House. Frances has been a TC with Great Valley Writing Project since 2004.

Mini-Summer Institute provides gateway into GVWP

by Brandy DeAlba & Juliet Wahleithner

Wednesday, September 17, 2008: Brandy and Juliet are sitting at a Starbucks in Elk Grove checking out the offerings at NWP’s annual meeting in San Antonio.

Brandy: I’m so excited about going to this conference with you Juliet. Every time we get together Carol has to make room in the GVWP calendar for another open series.

Juliet: I know! Do you remember when we were together at UC Davis at the Adopted Materials conference? I think it was St. Patrick’s Day last year.

Brandy: Oh yeah! That’s when Christine and Kim from San Diego talked about their farm team for the Summer Institute.

Juliet: You’re right! Wasn’t that when we stole the idea for our SI Lite?

Brandy: Don’t you remember? We were madly writing notes back and forth in the back of the room. Carol kept telling us to be quiet.

Juliet: I just remember that, by the end, my notebook page was bleeding pink from your pen.

Brandy: Whatever. It worked, didn’t it?

Juliet: Yes, I suppose you’re right. And this summer we actually got to see the SI Lite come to fruition.

Though it was a year later than we expected, this year saw the kick-off of (what we hope will be) the annual GVWP mini Summer Institute. The purpose of this five-day invitational was to expose teachers to the tenets of the Invitational Summer Institute without requiring the full four-week commitment and all that it entails.

Teachers were nominated and recruited by GVWP TCs in much the same manner as fellows are invited to attend the traditional SI. Participants submitted applications that included a signed letter of endorsement from an administrator. In the end, 20 participants ranging from first grade to university teachers signed on for five days of initiation into the Writing Project.

Our goal was to introduce teachers to the Writing Project model of teachers teaching teachers, teachers as writers, and teachers as researchers. Consequently, participants were engaged in personal writing to help establish a professional learning community. Once the community was established, participants formed writing groups. In these groups, participants also explored recent, relevant research in the areas of English Language Learners, revision, and creating a literacy community within the classroom. Participants learned about the demonstration lessons by participating in demos led by current GVWP TCs. Naturally, each day was kicked off with a word of the day and, of course, included both author’s chair and reflection throughout.

Juliet: Brandy, do you still have those reflection letters that I never saw?

Brandy: It was your own fault that you never saw them. You left me on my own on the last day while you went running off to ISAW. But yes, I have them.

Juliet: Well can I see them?

Brandy: Yeah, I brought them. You’ve got to stop and read them right now.

(A short time later . . .)

Juliet: Wow. I’m really blown away by how well this group gelled and how much we were all able to come together as a community. That was really amazing.

Brandy: Yeah, and the best part is, they all want to stay connected to GVWP.

Juliet: Well, I guess we better warn Carol now that she needs to make room in next summer’s calendar for whatever project we dream up when we’re in San Antonio.

Brandy DeAlba teaches seventh grade at Roosevelt School in Stockton. Juliet Wahleithner is a PhD student at UC Davis. The two are looking forward to their trip to San Antonio.

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