

# THE SAWPER

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## Teaching in the Time of Testing

By Deborah Green

*"Teaching used to be enjoyable. Now all I do is get kids ready to take the test."*

*(5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher)*

**T**he need to increase standardized test scores has caused many schools to adopt skills-based reading and writing programs. These reading programs can take anywhere from 90 minutes to two and a half hours each day with an additional 30 to 40 minutes in the afternoon for intervention. Writing programs focus on writing to a prompt and using a five-paragraph format that is developed in a step-by-step process. In addition, to help prepare students for the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), teachers are required by some districts to administer quarterly assessments in reading, writing, and math. These test-driven curriculums leave little time for authentic writing instruction.

Writing workshop and the writing process are being pushed aside as teachers focus on preparing students for testing. In a discussion of the dilemma, a first grade teacher admitted that writing workshop shouldn't be an independent center activity, but pointed out that she doesn't have time to focus on writing because of the time devoted to skills based reading and individual assessment. Another said that because of the time spent on reading students hadn't been doing much writing and faculty was looking for supplemental writing material to help their students pass the AIMS. These conflicts make it difficult to find balance when schools are doing everything they can to avoid being labeled a failing school. Teachers are caught between the pressure to get higher test scores and a desire to help students

*(Testing—Continued on page 2)*

## SAWP Snap

*"You cannot hide what you are.... For teachers, this is very, very important. What you are is what the children are going to learn, despite what you say.... As a writer, I try to make what I am not too far from what I say."*

-Madeleine L'Engle "Herself"

## Surviving the Mandates: One School's Story

By Kerry McArthur

**A**s educators we are enduring one of the most difficult periods of imposed mandates under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Teacher professionalism and student achievement have come under scrutiny. Many school districts impose a narrow skills-based curriculum with the intention of ensuring success on the state mandated tests. From 2000-2003 I worked as a Literacy Specialist for a district in Houston, Texas that allowed its staff professional choices for accomplishing student achievement. I share with you the story of one school that chose to put aside narrow choices and take a different path.

*(Mandates—Continued on page 3)*

(Testing—Continued from page 1)

see themselves as writers and thinkers.

Despite the efforts to improve test scores, recent studies spearheaded by the Program for International Student Assessment showed that there was no measurable change in U.S. reading literacy scores between 2000 and 2003. U. S. students placed 13<sup>th</sup> out of the 38 countries participat-

ing in the study. In a specific assessment for math literacy and problem solving, U. S. students placed 24<sup>th</sup> out of 38 in 2003. Further information is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005003.pdf>.

Teachers know their students need the time to develop their skills as writers and thinkers, to explore ideas in science, and to develop an understanding of the

world around them. Students need to know that writing goes beyond the five paragraph essay that must be completed in a single session. However, test-driven curriculums are pushing teachers to reduce or abandon those activities they know will provide their students with authentic instruction.

*Deborah Green teaches reading and math at Liberty Elementary in the Sunnyside District. She is a 2004 SAWP Fellow.*

## The Director's Disk...

By Anne-Marie Hall



**H**ome from Mexico, but straddling two worlds, I begin anew as Director of the Southern Arizona Writing Project. My mind reels from months in Mexican schools where I studied how literacy is taught in a system very different from our own. There it is not uncommon to meet taxicab teachers – those who teach in one school in the morning and hop in a cab to race to another school in the afternoon. All the urban schools in Oaxaca City, for example, are on double sessions – with children of professionals attending mornings and the working class sending their children to afternoon sessions. These children also work in the mornings prior to arriving at school. I learned that while many of the principles of teaching writing that we value in the writing project are also valued in Mexico, there is little professional development to bridge official curriculum with actual teaching practices. I also returned to Tucson with a renewed appreciation for the tremendous challenges of teaching in such diverse schools as ours. In Mexico, by contrast, children are far more homogenous in terms of socioeconomic status, race, language, religion, and shared values about literacy.

Robin Alexander writes that “the business of comparing education across cultures, nations, regions and indeed academic disciplines commands attention to borders, and it is short step from marking borders to defending them.” The difficulty in entering another country and culture to compare education is

that you do use your own experiences (based on practice and theory) as a yardstick by which to gauge what you see. After about two weeks in the classroom, though, I threw out the academic jargon and allowed myself to be moved by the command of the lived and living language of Mexico by 12-year-old children whose parents could neither read nor write. For while reading is scant and writing is often formulaic and overly concerned with conventions, the command and value of oral expression was where the language came to life for me. My seven months of absorbing the literature and culture of Mexico juxtaposed with the writings and interviews with 12-year old children won out in the end. I came away seeing how the oral tradition was a valued form through which these children made sense of their lives.

I am adjusting back into life in *los estados unidos*. Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, says that the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in your own home. As I return to my home (spiritually and physically), I see home through the lens of Mexico, with all the advantages we have but with an overemphasis on standards and assessment that makes me uncomfortable. Right now, I don't feel very at home when I see what is happening in schools where children and teachers are so over assessed. So being away makes me return with fresh eyes, even if I feel like a stranger sometimes.

The writing project ran smoothly under the steady hands of Roger Shanley and Flory Simon – with help from the terrific Advisory Board and the staff here at the University of Arizona, especially Mitzi Brydle and Lourdes Canto! Thanks to all!

(Mandates—Continued from page 1)

Bammel Middle School is a characteristically urban school that includes 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Like many urban schools, student achievement and test scores were low. At the heart of the school's curriculum plan was a strong leadership team with a commitment to both teachers and students. The first phase of the initiative for student improvement was shared with the staff a year before its implementation. This gave teachers the opportunity to have input and to request a transfer over the summer break if their philosophy was in disagreement with the school plan.

One of the biggest changes proposed by the initiative involved the language arts. As with most secondary school schedules, Bammel staff were teaching 45-minute class periods. Reading and English were two separate classes with specialists in each area. The departments merged and made a commitment to be trained in reading/writing workshop and to go on a block schedule of 90-minute classes. Over the summer those teachers who agreed with the plan participated in a book study using Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle*. What could have become divisive worked to build community and create a bond of trust among these teachers.

Another big commitment was the purchase of books to build classroom libraries. The PTO also joined in the initiative and pledged money for books over the course of two years. During the next year teachers continued to participate in staff development on individualized reading and process writing. Department meetings were a place to share and reflect together as teachers learned how to observe and

assess student progress.

As part of my role as Literacy Specialist, I also modeled lessons in classrooms and provided feedback for teacher lessons. In addition, I worked intensely with the lowest students for short periods of time each day to support classroom instruction. Six weeks before the state tests, instruction shifted to test prep. At this time students were taught test-taking skills and shown the difference between the "real" reading and writing they had been doing and the test format. While the goal had initially been to see improvement the second year of the initiative, test scores soared that first year.

Students who had never passed a reading or writing test became successful. I won't forget the always cool athlete who yelled across the school courtyard in a very uncool fashion, "Ms. McArthur, I passed the test!" or the student who broke down crying when she realized she would be joining "regular" classes the next year.

Taking the different path is not easy. Many teachers chose to leave over the first summer. For those who stayed, I observed a quiet confidence gained in themselves as professionals and in their students as learners. The second and third year of the initiative content area teachers joined to implement literacy strategies across the curriculum. At the end of the third year, Bammel Middle School was a recognized school by Texas state standards. I would argue that much more was achieved.

*Kerry McArthur is a full time doctoral student and Teaching Associate at U of A for the Department of Language, Reading, and Culture. She is a 2000 fellow of the Greater Houston Area Writing Project (GHAWP).*

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## The SAWPER Wants You!

The aim of *THE SAWPER* is to provide a vital network for the exchange of ideas within the Southern Arizona Writing Project community. *THE SAWPER* seeks short fiction (100 words or less), poetry, and brief articles on teaching strategies. In addition, stories (up to 300 words) focusing on SAWP projects, in-services, and outreach programs will be considered.

*THE SAWPER* is also seeking submissions for its "Young Writer's" column. SAWP Fellows often discover that their SAWP experiences have led to dramatic changes in their writing classrooms. Please encourage your students to write about how their writing has progressed during time spent in your classrooms. Short writing samples from students are welcome as well as narratives on their experiences as "authors." You will need to follow your school district's policies (parental permission, releases, etc.) to allow your students to be published. As a SAWP teacher, your written comments on how you motivate young writers are also encouraged. **Deadline: March 31, 2005. Theme: Social Justice and Writing in Civic Spaces.**

All submissions should be electronically submitted to Lynn Cuffari, Editor, [lynncuffari@comcast.net](mailto:lynncuffari@comcast.net).



## NWP Celebrates 30 Years!

By Anne-Marie Hall

*"Good, better, best, never let it rest!"  
-saying by an Appalachian mother*

Did you know . . .

- Congress supported NWP 15 years ago in 1991 all because of one teacher and one senator – that first appropriation was for \$1 million. The goal? To give every single teacher in America the opportunity to participate in the National Writing Project.
- The 2004 omnibus bill awarded \$20 million to the National Writing Project.
- Inverness Research studies investments made in improvement in education. They report that after 30 years, NWP can boast of the following numbers every single year: 3200 institute participants, 6000 teacher consultants, 6500 programs, 100,000 workshops, 92,000 teachers served, and 2.5 million contact hours with educators.
- Today 1 in 8 high school teachers, 1 in 9 middle school teachers, and 1 in 35 elementary teachers is a Fellow of a writing project.
- There are 185 affiliated sites of NWP and 800 university faculty leaders, 60,000 Summer Institute participants, 30,000 teacher consultants, and 1 million teachers served.
- The scale is amazing – the NWP investment and cost of teaching writing in schools is 30 cents on \$100. (That's like saying here's \$100 to have a nice dinner, and by the way, here's 30 cents to make it better. Oh, and by the way, be sure and evaluate the effectiveness of the 30 cents.)
- NWP is considered a "national improvement infrastructure." We get better at getting better, in other words.
- SAWP offered 25 programs in 2003-2004. These programs reached 541 people for a total of 745 program hours.

## SAWP Goes to the Trenches

By Judyth Willis

What better antidote to standardized testing than teachers gathering together to support each other in the renewal of their love for writing and the sharing of "best classroom practices?" What better way to renew the joy of teaching than to discuss the problems and successes of the classroom with colleagues? All this and more began January 19 at Cienega High School. Through the collaborative efforts of Flory Simon, co-director of SAWP Summer Institute, and Joe Sassone, Assistant Superintendent of Vail District, the Open Enrollment Institute is being held during spring semester at Cienega High School campus. The three credit course, listed in the U of A class list as LRC 597a or ENGL 597a, is being taught by Roger Shanley, co-director of SAWP Summer Institute, and Judyth Willis, retired teacher from the Vail District.

*"What better way to renew the joy of teaching than to discuss the problems and successes of the classroom with colleagues?"*

Throughout the state, preparing for the graduating class of 2006 has brought writing on demand, no choice of topic, and huge pressure on the students to pass the tests. This spells stress for the educators, stress for the students and a great deal of teaching-to-the-test. For this reason, SAWP has gone into the trenches. It is thought that taking the Institute directly to school districts, writing skills will improve, and at the same time, boost the confidence of Arizona students district by district. It will also lift the spirits and boost the confidence of teachers district by district. It can't happen soon enough!

For those of you who have taken the course, you remember how excited you were when the beginning of June rolled around and you drove to the U of A for the first day of your Southern Arizona Writing Project experience. Remember how after that first day, every morning of the month of June dawned with you waking up to the feeling of anticipation as to what the writing prompt would be. Perhaps, too, anticipation accompanied with a few butterflies if it was your day to present your "best practice." Remember how speakers like Professor Goodman made you aware once again of the miracle of reading with a capital "R?" Remember the pedagogy you read that renewed your faith in some of your practices and energized you to try a new technique? It is the middle of January 2005; June isn't even a glimmer at the end of the curriculum tunnel, but with SAWP going into the trenches, the Vail District teachers will soon be sharing memories like yours.

**If you are interested in providing this course for your district, contact Dr. Anne-Marie Hall, Director of Southern Arizona Writing Project at (520) 621-5423.**

*Judyth Willis recently retired from the Vail School District. She is a 2002 Summer Institute Fellow.*

## Grassroots Literature Finds a “Writing Space”

By Aimee Rogers

**A**n hour of just writing everyday! I can't do that! This is the initial reaction of many SAWP Summer Institute participants. However, most begin to look forward to and crave that hour every morning to just write. At the end of the summer you promised yourself that you would make time to write each day or at least each week. But reality set in and you haven't written in months. Could you find two hours a month in your schedule to spend writing?

Join us for Writing Space (formerly known as Grassroots Literature).

Grassroots Literature began in the 2003-2004 SAWP year, a vision of SAWP member JoAnn Groh, and an extension of the 2003 Social Justice Institute, as a place to come together to write and share. JoAnn envisioned this writing and sharing as a form of community activism and a first step into further forms of social activism. Grassroots Literature evolved into Writing Space by responding to participants' needs.

Writing Space meets the first Thursday of the month (February 3, March 3, April 7 and May 5) from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Transitional Office Building, 1731 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> St. Meetings begin with introductions and conversation. A writing prompt in the form of a short story, poem, or image is provided but participants are free to write on any topic. This is followed by time to write and reflect. At the end of the evening, for those who would like to share, time is provided.

*Meetings are facilitated by Aimee Rogers, [arogers@email.arizona.edu](mailto:arogers@email.arizona.edu).*

## Survey Seeks Input on SAWP Inservices

By Sharon Miller

**O**ne of the primary tenets of the National Writing Project is that the best teacher of teachers is another teacher. SAWP exemplifies this belief across all of its programs. Our invitational and special topics institutes, our teacher research program, and virtually everything we do involves teachers learning from and with one another.

Teacher Consultants (TCs), are those who have completed specific SAWP programs and have developed teaching demonstrations designed to promote effective teaching and learning in the school districts we serve. Much of what we hope to achieve through these demonstrations comes about when our TCs are called upon to share their expertise in various

professional development and inservice programs in Tucson and Southern Arizona.

The greatest obstacle we face in achieving these goals involves the availability of our TCs to engage in this work. TCs who are classroom teachers are rarely available for inservice work in other schools or districts. We believe it is crucial for us to overcome this obstacle to make our inservice program a valued and sought after resource for the local educational community.

To that end, we are reviewing our program to achieve the following goals:

- Expand SAWP influence in local school districts through active marketing of inservice offerings;
- Involve more SAWP fellows in delivering inservice in their schools, school districts, and beyond;
- Explore methods of using

SAWP resources and support;

- Survey SAWP fellows for updated information and potential resources and possibilities.

By now, you should have received the survey that we are conducting as part of this project. You will find the survey on line: <http://sawp.web.arizona.edu/>. Click on the survey link.

We need your input if we are going to be able to fully define our strengths and to develop a marketing plan that not only promotes our TCs as resources, but recognizes and rewards them for their professional expertise. SAWP, because of your involvement, is in a position to pursue a greater role in professional development and educational practice in Southern Arizona. We can do that with your response.

*Sharon Miller is a co-director of SAWP, working with the Teacher Research Institute and Inservice Programs. She did the Maryland Writing Project Summer Institute in 1985 and retired from teaching in Maryland in 1997.*

## SAWPER Sends Postcard From Edge of the Community

By Amethyst Hinton Sainz

This fall I was a new adjunct at an urban community college in Connecticut. In mid-October I found myself sitting across the desk from my department chair (let's call her Grace) as she reviewed my written feedback on a set of student papers, pencil in hand, noting places where I might have commented on a stylistic error or corrected a typo. Her feedback would have been perfectly valid on her own student's papers, but the knot of confusion and hurt that had begun to tangle itself somewhere under my breastbone in the days prior to our meeting continued to grow; I had understood from our last meeting that Grace felt that I was writing too much on papers, that I needed to step back and look for what the student brought into each piece. Apparently I had misunderstood. She wanted less in the margins and at the end, and more sentence-level corrections. She waved a copy of the *College Board Review* at me as she pointed out all my missteps.

What, exactly, had led to the demeaning and slightly bizarre position in which I found myself? I had no way of knowing which students had approached Grace with complaints, nor did I know which grades on which papers had dissatisfied them.

At the end of the meeting, Grace became more convivial and shared some departmental politics; apparently some adjunct and faculty members were upset that I was teaching 102, a course traditionally grabbed up by senior teachers. Since the adjunct orientation had been cancelled and I hadn't been invited

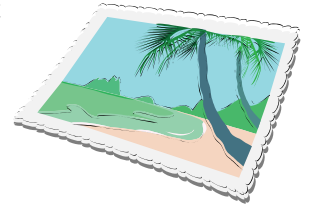
to any meetings where I might have met my colleagues, I had tried to make a few connections in the copy room over my typical last-minute set of copies. I asked questions about school culture, policy, payroll. I even asked a few teachers for advice on classroom situations. After all, at Catalina Foothills High School, this was how things worked. I had relied on my Critical Friends Group, my office mates, the English team, my Career Ladder coaches, the Spanish teachers at lunch, and even our house secretary. These colleagues helped me negotiate critical incidents, plan better, and be a better teacher.

How distant all these warm and helpful colleagues seemed during my interminable inspection at the college that day! After nine years of teaching high school, there I was with no voice (I *needed* work this spring), no office, and no more than two teachers who could match my name to my face. Aside from my relationships with my students, I was little more than a contract and an e-mail address.

I was directed by Grace that if anyone were to ask me what I was teaching, I should be very vague. After that point, I stopped popping into her office after class, and I stopped chatting in the copy room.

Though this was not the first time I had appreciated the importance of professional community, it was the first time I had experienced the painful lack of one.

*Amethyst Hinton Sainz teaches English at a community college in Connecticut; she is a 2004 SAWP Fellow and has taught high school English & Humanities for 9 years and will return to Catalina Foothills High School in the fall.*



### Nominations NOW accepted for 2004 & 2005 Exemplary Teacher Awards

- ✍ Eligible teachers include any educator who has participated in SAWP's Summer Invitational Institute or Teacher Research and Inquiry Institute. The teacher should have demonstrated leadership in one or more writing project programs: publications, seminars, inservices, professional learning communities, critical friends, writing retreats, young writers' programs, social justice projects, National Board for Professional Teacher Standards programs, English Language Learners programs, and so on. Please check the web site for a full list of programs. <http://sawp.web.arizona.edu>
- ✍ Nomination should include two paragraphs stating why the teacher is worthy of this nomination, your name and address and contact information. Give as many specific details as you can in your nomination letter.
- ✍ Nominations must be received by February 15, 2005. Please email your nomination to Anne-Marie Hall at [hall@u.arizona.edu](mailto:hall@u.arizona.edu) or mail it to SAWP, Department of English, PO Box 210067, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona 85721-0067.

## bell hooks: Educator Shows Compassion for All Learners

By Flory Simon

*“Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom.”*

-bell hooks

While completing an independent study on John Dewey, I came across the words “bell hooks” and couldn’t place what these words meant in the context of the sentence. After further research, I realized “bell hooks” was not a thing, but rather a person and not just any person, but an educator with compassion for all learners.

I acquired her books and read with fervor her beliefs about teaching in a democratic environment of learning for educators and those in the classroom.

As an author of more than twenty books for adults and children, I was impressed with her

ability to raise critical questions about classroom practices and to recognize that learning takes place far beyond the confines of academia, but extends to churches, family communities, and any place where people gather to share ideas and opinions.

During the November 2004 NCTE Convention, I had the good fortune to hear bell hooks talk to a packed audience of educators; I was eager to hear her speak about the values that motivate progressive social change. Her talk was more a conversation with the audience and her lively style of presentation was met with support from those attending.

Her talk was continually laced with the power of love as a means to end domination. “Loving people aren’t committed to domination,” she stated. She has written several children’s books in

support of her belief that youth need books about love in order to learn how to love others. She also stated that love takes time and we each need to be clear in our practice of love.

She stresses that the job of educators is to help learners think for themselves. It is her goal to not have her students think like her, but to think. In this capacity, learning becomes more than just confined to the classroom. Social change comes from individuals thinking for themselves and embracing love, spirit, struggle, and caring for each other.

*Teaching to Transgress* and *Teaching Community* are powerful books about what works in classrooms and gives teachers and students the empowerment to share learning as a means to share love and democracy.

*Flory Simon is the co-director of the Southern Arizona Writing Project’s Summer Institute.*

## Young Writer Muses About Looming SAT Essay

By Joseph Cuffari

As I complete my sophomore year in high school this semester, I now realize that college is fast approaching. I am not looking forward to another standardized test—this time the SAT. I know I will have to take this one or two times as I apply for college admission. I have taken the PSAT. It was an eye opener. Some of those questions were very hard.

What! Wait! Did I just hear that there is now an essay portion on the test? Why didn’t anyone do this earlier? Now I can finally express myself in words instead of how well I fill in the bubbles on my test.

Upon hearing this news, I was actually excited. I have taken many standardized tests in the past. They all look the same except they have differ-

ent variations of questions. It makes me nervous to know that basically my whole life depends on how I do on these multiple choice tests. I know, however, that writing will really help my career. I am able to express my thoughts through writing. On the SAT, I now have a voice on a topic – not of my choice, but at least I can have an opinion.

For a person trying to apply to a college, this may not be the best thing for them, especially if they do not like to write. But for me, that simple five paragraph essay may actually pay off.

*Joseph Cuffari is a sophomore at Salpointe Catholic High School. He is the son, and former student, of teacher/SAWP fellow Lynn Cuffari.*



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**Serving Educators in Five Counties and  
More than Seventy School Districts  
in Southern Arizona**

Director: Anne-Marie Hall  
Phone: 520-621-3436  
Fax: 520-621-5410  
Email: [hall@u.arizona.edu](mailto:hall@u.arizona.edu)  
Editor: Lynn Cuffari  
Email: [lynnecuffari@comcast.net](mailto:lynnecuffari@comcast.net)

We're on the Web!  
<http://sawp.web.arizona.edu/>

The Southern Arizona Writing Project—  
The University of Arizona

248300  
The Writing Program  
Department of English  
University of Arizona  
PO Box 210067  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0067

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## SAWP Announces Upcoming Events

- **Saturday Seminars**  
*February 12 - Personal Writing and Academic Discourse*  
*March 19 - Art and Artifacts*  
*April 23 - Investigating Your Own Teaching and Learning Through Classroom Inquiry*  
Sessions are from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Transitional Office Building. To register, email Anne-Marie Hall at [hall@u.arizona.edu](mailto:hall@u.arizona.edu)
- **Writing Space (formerly Grassroots Literature)**  
First Thursday of each month from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Transitional Office Building, 1731 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street on the UA campus. For more information, email Aimee Rogers: [arogers@email.arizona.edu](mailto:arogers@email.arizona.edu)
- **Social Justice, Equity, and Assessment – Monday, February 7 at 7 p.m. in the Transitional Office Building, 1731 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street on the UA campus.**  
Join us for a night to share stories, look at current research, and decide on study groups, key questions, and strategies for teaching in this time of high-stakes testing. We will have current research and opportunities to plan and share information. Parking is available on the street in front of the building. For more information, call 621-3436.
- **Language-at-the Borders Spring Conference – March 5, 2005 from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., Integrated Learning Center at the University of Arizona.**  
“Love of Language in a Time of Testing” will feature teachers, students, and administrators coming together to work for creative and productive solutions to challenges facing our educational community. Dr. Anne-Marie Hall will be the featured speaker. Continental breakfast and lunch are complimentary. To register, call the Department of English Writing Program, 621-3553.