

THE SAWPER

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SAWP Snap

*"Each time I sit down to write
I don't know if I can do
it...The flow of writing is al-
ways a surprise and a chal-
lenge. Click the computer on
and I am 17 again, wanting to
write and not
knowing if I can."*

-Donald Murray

*(This quotation appeared in Murray's
Obituary, The Boston Globe,
December 31, 2006.)*

E-Conversation Reflects on Major SAWP Issues

The following is a conversation about the NWP Annual Meeting in November 2006. Several SAWP attendees met, discussed, and then e-mailed each other their thoughts on topics ranging from the Summer Institute, technology, teacher research, and in-services. What follows are transcripts of e-mail conversations between Erec Toso, Heather Severson, Roger Shanley, and Sharon Miller.

Writing Momentum and the Summer Institute

Erec:

In last year's '06 Summer Institute, I luxuriated in writing. I went deep into some personal caves and explored. I also got a big charge from the teaching demos. Somehow, though, I did not put the two together. I wonder if there is a way in the SI to move from the expressive emphasis at the beginning of the institute into more pedagogically oriented writing by the end—in teacher talk, to move from expressive to transactional forms and purposes in the writing. A way to do this would be to focus on telling our stories as teachers—what inspires us, frustrates us, puzzles us, infuriates or scares us. I hope that this would lead to some questions, some areas of inquiry that might then lead into formation of Professional Learning Communities, writing groups, or an advanced institute. Simply put, I'd like to develop additional articulation between the Institute and continuing programs or initiatives.

Heather:

Erec, it's interesting that you note the apparent disconnect between teaching demonstrations and the writing time provided by the SI. This evokes my own post-SI dilemma about incorporating Quiet Time in my own writing classroom. I received so much value from that writing space that I want desperately to share it with my students. Do we have to pay our dues through years of training in conformity, learning how to sit still in our seats while the teacher talks, before we are able to explore in an environment of trust, autonomy and underlying expectation that we will achieve high results if left on our own in a quiet and supportive space, in a community of inquiry? What would happen if we provided the same opportunity to the children that we have in a graduate seminar? Perhaps the alternative approaches of Montessori and others of that ilk can address that question, which is slightly beyond the scope of our current conversation.

What it comes down to for me is this: do I approach my profession from the perspective of teacher as writer, or writer as teacher? As a writer, I can affirm the value of space, time and silence to write. Can I use that confidence to stand up for a somewhat unconventional approach as a teacher?

Sharon:

I like the idea of moving the written and oral discourse of the Summer Institute to different levels—being, of course, biased regarding inquiry. But I do like the idea of pedagogically oriented writing, and, coincidentally, I happened to meet and chat with

(E-Conversation—Continued on page 2)

(E-Conversation—Continued from page 1)



Sonia Nieto at the Teachers College Press booth in Nashville. That led me to linger over a couple of her books, which I ended up buying for SAWP. One is called *Why We Teach*, and it contains the very types of stories Erec suggests here. There are some pretty powerful, and thoughtful, narratives in the book exploring the good, the bad, and the ugly of teaching. It could provide great models.

Roger:

I struggle with the concept of influencing the shape of the teachers' writing in the summer institute unless the fellows feel the same tug. The beauty of the hourly writing is the "luxuriated in writing" sensation. Having said that, I wonder if we could promote conversations during the various group activities that encourage thoughtful moments about teaching sessions and "aha" moments. My worry is the level of influence practiced by some projects in which expressive writing is limited or eliminated. I know we would not go to that extreme, but artificial imposition is the problem. The challenge will be to encourage conversation about the idea in such a way that fellows lead in this direction rather than follow.

Heather:

I agree, Roger. The best part of that writing space was the utter freedom of it. I prefer the idea of conversations tied to other activities, or even a "professional writing" quiet time to dedicate to written reflection on issues in education. Protecting that freedom to write helps fellows stay in touch with the sense of wonder that authentic, autonomous writing can provide. This helps us pass on that experience to our students.

Sharon:

Good point, Roger, about the importance of fellows leading rather than following in this kind of direction. That said, I think you find that the stories in the Nieto book are powerful expressive writing.

Erec:

Moving into more transactional writing in the second half of the summer institute doesn't have to detract from expressive or other forms of writing being generated. I guess I see the transactional piece as an option, as in possible prompts, or maybe a separate piece of the design. I don't have this fully thought through.

Red Cedar Writing Project in Michigan has the fellows break into "teaching interests" groups, or something like that. Members of the groups study issues such as assessment or motivation or grammar. The groups work and present on these

subjects together, as I remember. (I'll have to check that).

Anyway, I don't see the expressive/transactional writing shift to be an either/or, but more of a both/and. I see this in the telling of teacher stories and putting those stories in the context of larger conversations about the teaching of writing.

Sharon:

I think it's inevitable that attending the Summer Institute brings a new perspective about teaching and learning and we can't help but consider where we've been and where we're going. To some extent, the Personal Statement that is part of the application process is a first draft of our thinking about these issues. Revisiting that would be an interesting exercise, and it would provide a transactional experience that brings the summer fellows full circle. We begin the summer as teachers, become writers, and then leave as teachers again—hopefully, teachers who write. Becoming writers changed us profoundly, and alumni of the institute often proclaim that the Summer Institute "changed my life," and "transformed my teaching." How do we document these transformations?

Roger:

This may be where the cycle continues...with PLC work from the summer fellows, charging their batteries at their sites with study groups in areas of interest and concern. Again, I think this is where Sharon's efforts would yield return. The existing strands of outreach might be implemented at various sites depending on the PLC focus and school need.

Teaching and Technology

Heather:

How can we help teachers make use of technology, not for the sake of technology, but for the sake of the objectives that can be met through assistive devices and applications? It occurs to me that it has taken about seventeen years to achieve my current level of expertise in technology, such as it is. From my early reluctance to use computers and email to serving as a technology liaison (a title that still makes me laugh, luddite that I am), I've had an apprenticeship as a web designer, a spattering of formal training workshops on specific applications, a lot of cutting and pasting while I learned hard HTML code and how to navigate the features of web editors, and multiple opportunities to practice and refine my skills in various programs for various purposes. Only this slow-cooked but well-baked confidence, achieved over time, allows me to feel up to the task of learning new applications. If I didn't have a certain objectivity and ability to see the bigger picture, keeping my overarching goals in mind, I would be even more overwhelmed.

Teachers are faced with a dizzying choice of tools, official and unofficial mandates to promote digital literacy, and frustration about budgetary limits. Administrators worry about student access to the stormy sea of information on the world wide web, where treachery arrives on the same bandwidth as essential wisdom. What can we do to help?

(E-Conversation—Continued on page 3)

(E-Conversation—Continued from page 2)

Erec:

As the slow learner in the bunch, I advocate slowing things down and asking how technology can help me teach. In other words, I have to know where I am going and then I can look at ways technology can help me get there. For example, if I want students to workshop papers, I can look at ways to distribute and comment on drafts. I'll likely absorb new information about ways to do that better if I see the application. Most of my technology workshops have been about the technology, with little or no context of teaching. I guess that's one of the reasons so little of it has soaked in. But that might just be an excuse for my resistance to learn. Any thoughts from others?

Roger:

A recent change I made lately speaks to this. I still write response and comments on student work, but I am trying digital voice messages as a way of personalizing my comments. Believing that conferences with students are highly effective but not finding the time needed to speak with each student regularly, I am speaking comments on portfolios and larger writing assignments into a digital voice recorder. I find myself "talking" to the student and feel I have less distance in this method than the written comments on papers or stick-it notes. I place these comments into each student's computer folder and he/she listens in the lab or at another time of choice. I feel this use of technology arrived at a time in my teaching when a change was looming and the knowledge I had gained about digital work allowed me to connect need with technology.

Sharon:

Although I'm reasonably tech savvy, I've found that a great deal of technology is layered on top of our teaching as opposed to integrating easily with it. If it will take a considerable amount of time to learn how to use a particular technology, and if I have to learn it and teach at the same time, I may not put in the time necessary to learn how to use it effectively. For example, when computerized grade books first came out, I found them time intensive and not as efficient as my paper grade book. It was time consuming and a duplication of efforts, because I was afraid not to have my paper trail.

I like Roger's idea of recording comments to the students; it would be interesting to find out whether or not the students actually listen to them and make use of the ideas. I'd be inclined to use the comments to open up a discussion—I'd pose questions and ask them to respond. (Then it would become a teacher research project for me.)

I'm glad that so much technology has gotten easier and the software is often intuitive and easy to learn. I can remember when (in the 70's) we started getting computers in school and available to the classroom, a professional development course was offered by the district and most teachers signed up. We learned machine language and how to write programs—one of the exercises was how to make an endless loop with "if-then" statements. You could make a printed design run through the screen over and over. What a waste of time.

Engaging Teachers in Research & Professional Development

Sharon:

Recently, I participated in an NWP on-line discussion of in-service which was quite an experience. It was, by turns, stimulating, overwhelming, and frustrating. The sheer volume of postings was almost too much to keep up with, but before it was over, I realized that I had begun to see in-service in a new light. I had already been struggling with the delivery model—even though our delivery is not garden variety delivery, too often we can still come across as the "experts." I wanted to figure out how to make our professional development programs more engaging and meaningful for teachers.

A big part of the on-line discussion was about the study group model, one which empowers the teachers to examine their teaching, the research, the student work, and the data to determine the agendas for their professional development workshops—agendas which directly address the needs of THEIR students in THEIR schools. There's a risk in offering this kind of model to a principal—in the past two days I've had two diametrically opposed reactions by principals: One rejected the idea out of hand; the other listened to my meandering, exploratory (even vague?) talk about such a model, and said "I like it." So on the one hand, I can comfortably revert to our delivery model and on the other, I must venture into unfamiliar territory to create a setting in which the teachers make the decisions.

I'm reminded of an old Zen aphorism: "Leap and the net will appear." Keep your fingers crossed.

Roger:

I've been wondering about the role of outreach and in-services in SAWP since we dedicate much energy in this direction and seem to get a limited response. The teacher study group holds merit since it places teachers in the center of the professional development and values their concerns and insights. The challenge will be to promote positive and productive interactions. Critical Friends protocols come to mind in such a format since they retain purpose and focus for discussions and pursue results that encourage ongoing communication, introspection, retrospection, and reflection.

I have been pondering the idea of finding ways to enable the fellows from each summer institute to act as emissaries of the NWP adage "Teachers Teaching Teachers." Perhaps we could fund them to start teacher study groups at each site with some direction from Critical Friends protocol as practiced in the coaching sessions. Sharon could stay in touch with interested parties and provide experts of certain areas of interest from the cadre of past teacher demonstrations. This would keep these fellows involved and interacting with our project and spread "scholarship" as Patty Lambert Stock referred to the sharing and hybridization of fellow teachers' work.

(E-Conversation—Continued on page 10)

Director's Disk

By Erec Toso



It's one of those times of year. You know what I mean: papers are piling up; taxes have to be prepared; bills from the holidays come due. Here in the SAWP office we're processing books bought at the National Writing Project's Annual Meeting, filing away the newly completed Continued Funding Application (thanks Anne Marie!), and setting in motion what will become the Summer Institute.

As a rookie director, I wake up at night wondering if it will all work. My other jobs of teaching, advising graduate students, serving on committees, and course directing all have deadlines that need to be met. I want to pull out my hair sometimes. The last thing I feel capable of doing is developing a vision for the Writing Project

On the first morning back at work, I looked at the skinny file holding the few applications for the SI, and I began to despair. What if it doesn't work this year? What if things go bad? The self chatter started to rise in my head. Then I settled down and said to no one in particular "Look, this is going to be what it is going to be. Just show up and do your best. There are some things that are just beyond your control." That second, the phone rang, and Victor Mercado from Gear Up called and asked if there were still any slots in the SI. "There might be," I answered. The phone rang again as soon as I hung up with Victor. This time it was Richard Ruiz, the Department Head of LRC. He wanted to know if a teacher from Colombia would be able to attend the SI. I told him we'd reserve a spot.

And so it goes. SAWP is about the people who support it. It is bigger than I am. It's about the power of writing, and the empowerment that comes from being taught well to write. The vision is already there; I just need to find my place in it. I'm here to serve that purpose, to do what I can to make it part of teaching in southern Arizona. I have been teaching at the university now for many years now, and feel a little out of touch with what's going on beyond the gates. I'm open to learning more how to help.

My book about the snakebite is coming out and I am willing to come do readings and talk about writing in classes or with larger groups. Here's the UA Press web address:

<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/BOOKS/bid1788.htm>. If any of you feel that fits with what you are doing.

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. Teachers, let us know (a short blurb) what works in your writing classrooms. As SAWP teachers, your written comments on how you motivate young writers are also encouraged.

The deadline for the next newsletter is April 18. All submissions should be electronically submitted to lynncuffari@comcast.net.

Is There A Story There? Get Out That Writer's Notebook

By Kate Cusumano

Morning prayer-time in my first-grade Catholic school classroom was a good opportunity to take our “pulse” for the day. It was also a good way to get a better idea of what was going on in my students’ lives. Issues of interest to the students surfaced, frequently giving us ideas for future writing projects.

One morning I called on Jeffy, who had his hand raised with a prayer request. He lisped out “I pway for my father, who is sick.” Turning to call on other children I soon noticed that Jeffy’s hand was raised once again.

“Jeffy?”

“I pway for my father who is *weally* sick.”

Didn’t he think the first prayer was good enough? Before I could call on another child Jeffy’s hand shot up again. Exasperated, I asked “What *is* it Jeffy?”

“I pway for my father who is *weally, weally* sick and had to have an operation!”

Well, he had my attention now. “Why did he need an operation?”

“My mother made him a baloney sandwich!”

Trying to maintain a serious demeanor at what must be a childish misinterpretation of events, I led the class in an earnest prayer for their classmate’s father.

That afternoon his mother explained her husband had needed an emergency appendectomy – nothing to do with the baloney sandwich he’d eaten for lunch that day!

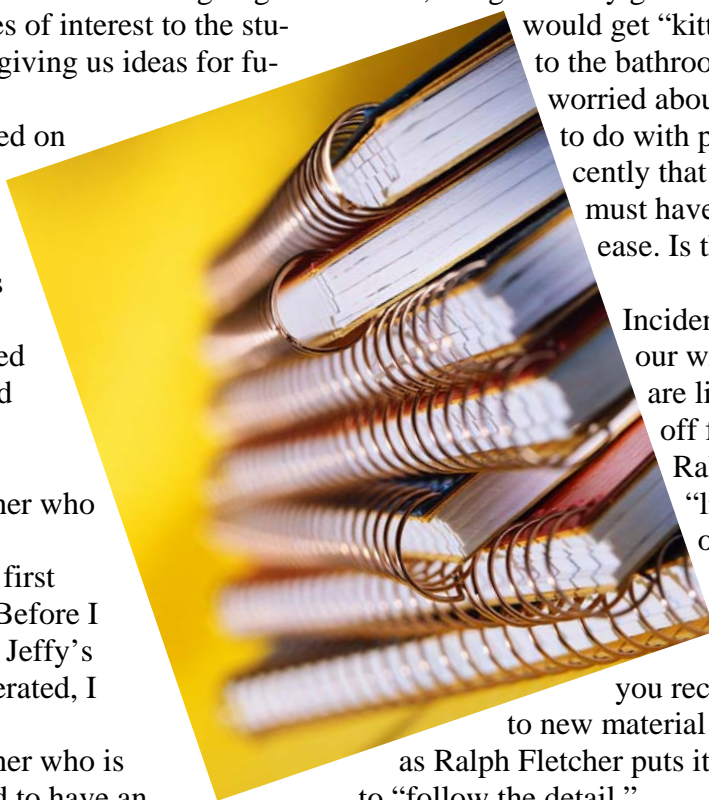
I can’t hear of appendicitis now without thinking of Jeffy and baloney sandwiches. It reminds me of misunderstandings from my own early childhood, things like my grandmother’s warning that I would get “kitty” disease if I didn’t go to the bathroom frequently. For years I worried about cats and what they had to do with peeing. It was only recently that it dawned on me that she must have been saying *kidney* disease. Is there a story there?

Incidents like these belong in our writer’s notebooks. If you are like me and keep putting off faithfully recording what Ralph Fletcher calls the “lines, bits, lists, questions” of your life now may be the time to take that step.

One of the many details you record there may “lead you to new material you never knew you had” as Ralph Fletcher puts it. William Stafford tells us to “follow the detail.”

Maybe its time for us all to take something out of our writer’s notebooks and “follow the golden thread” to the story (Stafford). If you need new ideas for such a task read Ralph Fletcher’s *Breathing In, Breathing Out: Keeping a Writer’s Notebook* (Heinemann, 1996). Happy Writing Year!

Kate participated in the 2006 Summer Institute. She reports that she has begun her writer's notebook now and hopes to have many more "golden threads" in the year to come.



The Editor Resolves to Write

By Lynn Cuffari

I became a card-carrying SAWP Fellow after the life-changing experience of participating in the 2002 Summer Institute. As a middle school English and Literature teacher, I immediately implemented new teaching strategies that included writing, writing, and more writing. I beam every time my former students tell me how they cherish their showcase portfolios, just as I cherish the one I created during those glorious weeks within the shelter of the Transitional Office Building!

Things change.

While I pride myself on having inspired many young teenagers to write, I have not been very good at meeting my own resolutions to write (a line every day?). I filled my journals as my students filled theirs when I was in the classroom; however, last May, I took my road less traveled and become the principal of Immaculate Heart School. As an administrator, my personal writing time has been sharply curtailed. I dutifully carry my journal with me every single day. Since May, the only additions to those empty pages have been a few sporadic notes with weak promises that I will write “when I get a chance.”

It is now a new year. I regularly go to the gym to stay in physical shape, but for 2007, I have also resolved to get back into writing shape.

I write a weekly column for our school, which I call “Principal’s Ponderings.” I love writing this column, but the only way I have been able to do it is to impose my own deadlines and make it a part of my work. I tell parents who comment on my columns that I had to become the principal so I could be published!

To maintain my resolve, I have had to take a critical look at my daily calendar and outside commitments. One of the activities I am going to have to give up is my work as editor of *The SAWPer*. This does not mean I will ever give up SAWP. I especially enjoy working on projects that include young writers. Plus, now I might have time to submit an article or two a year to the newsletter instead of just trying to keep up with editorial challenges!

Resolutions work. Here is a sample of what I write each week for school. An additional plus to a weekly column is that I am now in a position to model to teachers, students, and parents the importance of being able to communicate through the written word. The feedback is tremendous. I also visit classrooms and watch the wonderful, messy, and creative writing process in action. I continue to be inspired by children who haven’t quite developed our adult inhibitions. Reflection does give us direction.

Principal’s Ponderings

It is 4:03 and I can hear the clock ticking. Don’t despair, I am not going to go into a long, metaphorical rant on how quickly time passes by. It’s just that I can literally hear the clock ticking each second. It is quiet for the first time today in the Immaculate Heart School office. The last bell rang an hour ago. Most of the faculty and staff have gone home or retreated to their classrooms, and I am alone in this little “house.” I understand at this moment what it means to “hear the quiet.”

Activity at Immaculate Heart begins with the first turn of the key in the front door lock. Within minutes, the telephone begins ringing. An early student or two comes in to wait for the morning bell. Teachers rush in and out to make preparations and gather supplies for the day. The copy machine hums as it warms up and the coffee usually finishes brewing just as I need to run out the door to meet and greet students at carpool.

We then gather for our morning prayers. It is such a joy to see the children bound out of the buildings all bundled up for the cool mornings. Their smiles and hellos warm my heart even when my hands are cold.

Once prayers are over, the day progresses at warp speed. Before I know it, recess and lunch volunteers are at the office to sign in and out of their duties. Children come and go with various requests from teachers, and ailments that require everything from a band-aid to an ice pack to simple a reassuring pat on the back. I dash in and out and to and from classrooms.

The phone keeps ringing and so does the final bell. Through the cacophony, the clock keeps ticking...it’s just that I can’t hear the time going by. I am part of the time in this place, and it is a wonderful place to be.

Okay, so time does go by so quickly. (I really didn’t intend to bring this up!) We have jumped into 2007 with renewed energy after such a nice long Christmas break. Despite a few sleepy grumbles in the morning, the students seem happy to be back to their routines. Even bumpy roads, blocked entrances, and heavy machinery have not deterred us!

We welcome several new families who have enrolled nine new students this semester! We look forward to a busy schedule that will include Lent and Easter, busy sports schedules, academic projects, May Crowning, First Holy Communion for our second graders, promotion for our eighth graders, and lots of wonderful activity at the High School.

I just glanced up at the clock. Another 30 minutes have gone by while I have pondered time. Welcome back and Happy New Year!

A Polemic Against Planned Obsolescence

By Heather Severson, SAWP Technology Liaison

Recently, my cell phone contract came up for renewal. I reluctantly conceded that I “need” my cell phone to coordinate events in my role of divorced co-parent of two preschool children, gypsy scholar, and freelancer who is hardly ever in one predictable place with a real phone where I can be reached. So I renewed the contract. My phone promptly malfunctioned—I’m not kidding—the same week! When I went to the Unnamed Wireless Store to describe and solve my problem, the salesman joked that they had a “button” to push at the reactivation of each contract so customers have to “upgrade” their phones after they’re already committed.

“Just kidding,” he said.

“Ha, ha,” I said, muttering under my breath about seeing the design and marketing principle of planned obsolescence in action.

When informed that no, my cell phone could NOT be fixed, I insisted that I be pointed to the cheapest replacement model they had. The sales staff got my message and stopped trying to describe in delectable terms the lusciously necessary features of the shiny phones attached by wires to the displays in the center of the store, and led me to the back, to a nondescript grey shelf with two options. The one I selected (as if it mattered) wasn’t in stock.

I assumed that this new phone would fit right into my lifestyle, presto chango. To some extent, it did; for a “small fee” I had them transfer over all the stored telephone numbers and other information I’d fumbled to enter into my phone over the two years I owned it. But none of the “accessories” fit the new phone: not the battery rechargers (for home or auto) nor the handy belt clip/carrying case, or any of the other glamorous cell phone add-ons that lined the shelves, but that I’d rejected the first time, and cer-

tainly wasn’t going for now.

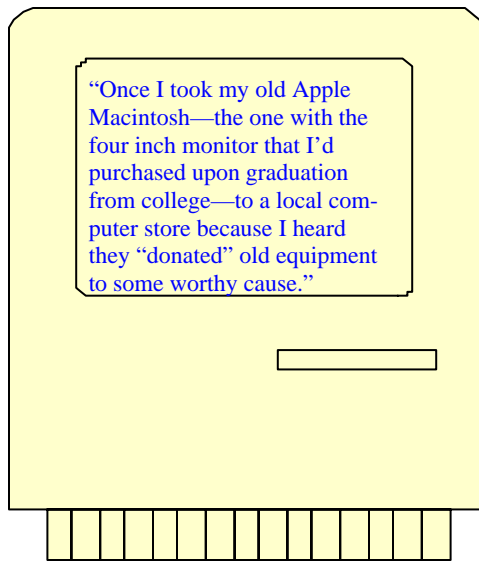
“What am I supposed to do with all this old stuff?” I asked. An apologetic shrug was the only answer I received. Now it’s all in a bag on a shelf in my office closet, waiting for its new home—along with an old computer hard drive, an old laptop, and various computer accessories that have started to pile up as I’ve upgraded over the years.

Once I took my old Apple Macintosh—the one with the four inch monitor that I’d purchased upon graduation from college—to a local computer store because I heard they “donated” old equipment to some worthy cause. I handed over a box of bulky machinery and attachments, and watched as it was haphazardly piled into a storage shed in the back of the shopping center to join a tiny representative sample of all the abandoned plastic, metal, rubber, and whatever mysterious ingredients make up

these technological tools we are learning to make use of every day. What really happens to all that stuff?

“Donate your old phone to the Brewster Center,” a friend advised me when I began to formulate my rant. “They distribute the phones to victims of domestic violence to use in case of emergency.” That would be a great idea if my phone worked, but in that case, I’d still be using it myself. I’ve also been advised by well-meaning friends to “donate” my old computer to a school. Sounds great, do something to support education! I’m all for that!

But here’s what I don’t know: if I don’t want the crummy old thing and my needs have outgrown its capacities, or if it doesn’t even work anymore (which is really the only reason I tend to replace something like that), why would I want to burden someone else with it? Does an average school system



(Polemic—Continued from page 7)

have a process for the intake, repair, distribution, installation and maintenance of these antique machines? I somehow doubt it; feel free, readers, to correct me if I'm wrong.

I can't in good conscience pass on my pain in the neck to someone else. I need more viable, conscionable alternatives, and I need to know more about the path my junk will take when it leaves my care: not just where it goes next, but where it ultimately ends up. If it is dumped in a landfill now or after it's been driven around town a few times, it's still "my bad," to use a bit of current vernacular. My karmically-motivated, individually accountable self is still winning out over the part of me that wants to clear my clutter in a nice clean sweep for the new year.

Ultimately, I want to do something to put a stop to the practice of planned obsolescence. Tweaking the circuitry for every new model is certainly commercially feasible--what a way to make a buck on newer and shinier gadgets--but it creates a gigantic mess in a very short amount of time, if a cell phone or computer has an active lifespan of only a few years, and so many of us are clamoring for the newer, faster (or simply functional) model. What can I do as a semi-conscious consumer and ordinary citizen to make a whit of difference, aside from ranting about the problem?

I've posed a lot of questions without providing a single solution. At the moment I don't have enough of the tenacity required to serve as investigative reporter, so all I can do is show where I have started in my own search for solutions. I hope some of this information can help others battle the growing mound of technical detritus that is backing up in homes and/or workplaces (I know I'm not the only one).

As a parent, educator and common citizen of our planet, I charge myself and others to think carefully and critically about the solutions we choose to implement as we deal with this issue. Please, let us learn ways to defeat the monster of consumerism and



clean up its defecation while responsibly sustaining the convenience and quality of our lives.

Places to start:

- McDonough, William and Michael Braungart. 2002. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point Press.

If the issues that I touch on in this column disturb you even a little bit, PLEASE read this

book. Then join the Cradle to Cradle Community at: <http://www.mbdc.com/optin.htm>

- http://www.earth911.org/master.asp?s=lib&a=electronics/elec_index.asp

A web resource by Earth 911: Making Every Day Earth Day. This site answers some of my questions with its various informative links, and even provides a search function (by zip code for precision) to find reuse and recycling centers in our own communities.

Check out SAWP On the Web

<http://web.arizona.edu/~sawp/>



...promoting the most current research and practices in the teaching of writing to ethnically diverse teachers from urban and rural areas of Southern Arizona

What Are We Feeding These Kids?

A Public School Teacher's Change

A Slam Poem (to be recited aloud)

By Deborah Ford

The following poem was inspired by my students who 'forced' me to write for it them and share it. It took a months for me to start the poem because they are so talented and I didn't want to embarrass myself. (One of my kids of that year won the PUHSD poetry contest for 10th grade in English, for example. I generally have several winners and I HATE poetry competitions. I tell them this even as I'm saying, "Thank you for your submission. Now, release your grip on the paper. Trust me." The title of the poem was inspired by another teacher who saw my students perform at a slam assembly at school and was so impressed he asked me, "What are you feeding these kids?"

My 'slam' poets (performance poets) said, "If we're sharing our poems, you need to write a slam poem and share it too." This poem won the 2006 Arizona English Teachers Association contest.

"What are you feeding these kids?"

That's a question breathed
By a colleague intrigued
Eyes budged with impression
As he watched my students
Roll up their sleeves, wipe their feet
To spit beats of expression

I mean last week
The writing whined anorexic
So pale and bleak
Like a bunch of anemics
Milking hope from a dead poet's last red blood cell

What are we feeding these kids?
Shakespeare and Paz
Alexie and Morrison, not *so* much anymore because...
The best meals are made of cannibalism!

There, I said it
The trick is to eat yourself alive
Before a blood thirsty throng
Beating chests with tongues
Gnashing teeth with desire as you plunge the knife deep

What do I feed 'em?
I feed them me
Watch me spew
Don't you wish you knew how to do it too?
Slam is as easy as vomit, got it?
What? You spit up in your mouth, no joke?
Too uptight you swallow it and choke?
I dare you to get over yourself
Grow a backbone and a blistered finger
And acid it up the vocal chords
Let it roar and pour it to the floor
Last night's spaghetti and this morning's grits

Let it out

Drink a soda? fuci
Thought I smelled it

Puke it out, let it roll

Let all the sights, tastes, smells, colors and textures unfold
Dance with the spirits that live within
Your ghosts: dare them to sing, dare them to swim

What are you feeding these kids?
Dinner served! Pull your chairs up to poetry's word
Students serve yourselves your selves
Heap your plates full and suckle on the last words
of your classmates, unnerved
Pour gravy on verbs heard as emerged
A sophomore's heart opened with paper and ink and breathed
out and purged

Yesterday we ate Johnny's heart
A delicate taste of bitter meat
And Chavo's love of poetry so sweet
And Ms. Piper's *Release*
The words slipping and dripping down her chin
to her knees
And we wanted more but the bell rang, please...

What am I feeding these kids?
My heart? My blood and guts?
No. Before, I lied,
Pushing my deepest thoughts and feelings aside
Cuz teacher training preaches: don't get close
Keep your distance or you're toast
So, I defer to throwing out my prepackaged
'Tootsie Rolls'
Because I know

(Kids—Continued on page 10)

(Kids—Continued from page 9)

They'll eat 'em up
 Are you crazy?
 I can't take the same risks I ask of my kids
 Cuz my stuff's not sanitized, I'm too wise and
 I want to retire someday
 Wanna roof over my head
 And maybe a gray-haired boyfriend
 To stay through the news and dinner

What are *you* feeding *our* kids?
You! I'm talking to you!
 Don't feed me no pearls
 Round and glassy
 Strung and hung to be admired, uninspired
 A while straightjacket of grammatical correctness
 Each pearl looking like the rest, shined up
 Like some old lady's white gloves and Sunday morning heels
 No! Spill your pockets. Now.

What you got?
 You hoarding a quarter pound hamburger, dripping with cheese
 With guacamole and crunchy greens?
 Put it on the table now
 Or is yours more like the lemon drizzle on a high calorie
 Slice of New York cheese cake
 Or you got some French fries, the homemade kind
 Sliced up, different sized
 Red skin still stuck, and salted
 They slide, slide, slide
 You got some ketchup? (Well, I tried)

What you say?
 You got a buffet stored up in that backpack you clutch like a
 tumor
 Up and down the hallway
 Is it getting too heavy? Is it weighing too much?
 Well, stop guarding it like a dog with his last bone over there
 The rest of us are ready to share
 Your fluffy white bread rolls, your golden round symphonies of
 taste- real butter melting
 We're waiting, our palettes palpitating

What am I feeding these kids?
 I made a small feast last night, sitting at my computer to type
 T.V. off, kids at their dad's, I composed this tiny offering of
 words for my students
 And you ate!
 I hope it's not too late for you to trust me as a writer
 Just like you

So? What you got cooking, good looking?
 What you got?

Deborah Ford works for the Phoenix Union High School District at Metro Tech High School. She teaches 9th and 11th English. She is also a writer. Her first novel is a young adult novel, The Pack, (pen name Nikki O'Neill) and is available at iuniverse.com. She may be contacted at debbieodowd@msn.com.

(E-Conversation—Continued from page 3)

Erec:

For some reason, the idea of building community reading and study groups around issues that attract individual teachers keeps coming up for me. I know that I am not equally interested in all aspect of teaching. And I am passionate about others. I like to work on issues I find engaging, to stand my ground and advocate for those issues. I also trust that groups working together in areas they feel strongly about will innovate and come up with ideas I have not even yet considered.

So the question for me becomes, what are these areas? And how do we facilitate formation and organization of reading, writing, and research groups to address these area of interest?

Sharon:

It seems to me that our SAWP Professional Learning Communities program was on the leading edge of the study group movement, but it has not yet become what it could become. I like the idea of encouraging the summer fellows to consider following their summer experience with study groups supported by our PLC grants. We need to make this a very attractive proposition. I'm wondering if we need to look at ways to provide more structured support and engagement for those who do start a PLC. So much of what has been done and is being done in these communities remains "under the radar." How do we help them meet their needs? Is it just with a check? And how do we raise the profile of groups who are doing great work?

I have a few teacher researchers this year whose questions and pursuits are very similar—they would make a great PLC, so I will push them to consider that as a follow-up to this year's work. Perhaps we should more actively "invite" teachers to do some of these things. I've always found that the most effective recruitment strategy is the personal invitation. Something to think about.

Sawpers: Feel free to respond to this topic on the SAWP listserv or to contact Erec Toso at netoso@u.arizona.edu.

Other topics will follow in upcoming newsletters.



Rubrics Reconsidered

By Sharon Miller

One of the real treats at the NWP annual meeting is the NCTE book exhibits. In the Heine-mann booth—*always* tempting—a title caught my eye: *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, by Maja Wilson. Hmm... I didn't know anything about her but the foreword was written by Alfie Kohn. That definitely interested me. From the back of the book, I read, "rubrics can hurt kids and replace professional decision-making with an inauthentic pigeonholing that stamps standardization onto a notable nonstandard process." I bought the book.

Wilson provides a thorough examination of rubrics and their impact on writing instruction and assessment from the earliest efforts to assess writing by actually asking students to write to more recent high-stakes and classroom assessments.

I didn't find a lot to disagree with in Wilson's arguments; in fact, there was much with which to agree. Like Wilson, I suspect that all of us have struggling students who one day write something that doesn't fit the mold. Not that it's "good," exactly, but it has a creative spark or a short passage that touches us deeply, something that reveals possibilities for this student. What do we do? How could we grade it with a rubric that reduces it to six mathematically calculated, isolated factors that are, together, supposed to add up to good writing? Wilson points out that even if we give it an "overall impression grade," we still rely on the rubric; she questions how the rubric functions to support ongoing growth when the door to possibility for this student has just opened a crack.

Recently, I did a presentation for a group of high school teachers. The subject was using score point five as a single target for student writing—a strategy to help teachers and students be more efficient in AIMS test preparation. I had given them the first draft of a piece of student work and asked them to think about what revision advice they might give the student. After some idea sharing, I gave them the revised writing, a piece which was a score point five

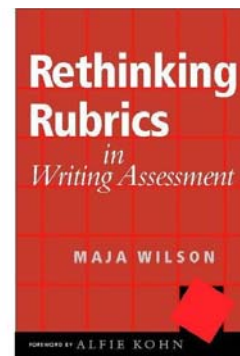
exemplar from the NWREL Six-Traits web site. As they read, one teacher looked up at me and said, "This isn't good writing." And she was right. I think most of us would agree that the writing that achieves passing scores on AIMS is rarely something we'd all call good writing. But if it passes AIMS, we might be satisfied. From my point of view, what is missing most often is reader engagement.

Wilson places a great deal of emphasis on writing that means something to the reader, writing that somehow makes us think or act or react. She points out that disagreement among readers about the worth of a written piece is a good thing. Rubrics, she asserts, not only standardize the writing, but they also standardize the *readers*. That's the point of rubric "norming" sessions.

Wilson doesn't simply tell us what's wrong with rubrics in writing assessment, she provides strategies for responding to student work that does not reduce their writing to a grade but opens the door to possibilities. While some of us might wonder how these strategies work in an elementary classroom (her students were all juniors or seniors), we may also question the degree to which classroom teachers would be free to assert their independence of AIMS preparation in favor of a more egalitarian approach to writing instruction.

In any case, Wilson's book provides an opportunity to open a conversation among teachers about promising practices in writing instruction and assessment. Along with the book, I've included a copy of a Vickie Spandel article, "In Defense of Rubrics," which appeared in the September, 2006, issue of the *English Journal*. She responds to Kohn and Wilson's criticisms of rubrics and offers an opposing viewpoint which will contribute to healthy conversation—even arguments—about the worth of rubrics.

The book can be found in that portion of the SAWP library which is currently at the TOB for the Teacher Research and Inquiry Institute.



SAWP Upcoming Events

Saturday Seminars

February 10, 2007

- **Session 2-4: The Route Not Taken: Handling the Paper Load Without Running off the Road**

Featured Presenters: Leslie Frayne, Booth-Fickett Magnet Middle School and Inger McGee, Pueblo Del Sol Elementary School, Sierra Vista, "Take a Load Off Annie: How to Increase Student Writing Without Increasing Teacher Work"

- **Session 3-4: Speed Enforcement Zone...Students Working: Reaching Students with Special Needs**

Featured Presenter: John Skarhus, Buena High School, Sierra Vista, "What Does That Mean? Explicit Vocabulary Instruction for Increased Academic Achievement."

March 17, 2007

- **Session 2-5: Oh, the Places We've Been: Sharing and Celebrating Best Practices**

- **Session 3-5: Oh, the Places We've Been: Sharing and Celebrating Best Practices**

This is a joint session wherein participants will share and celebrate their practices and successes with teaching writing to special populations and across the curriculum. Everyone will go away with a compendium of practices they can implement in their own classrooms.

April 28, 2007

- **Voices in the Village: Teacher Researchers Share Their Stories**

This program is tentatively scheduled as a conference to be held on campus. Presentations will be made by teacher researchers in the SAWP Teacher Research and Inquiry Institute, the Sunnyside Unified School District Career Ladder Action Research program and in classrooms around the Tucson area. Teachers who have registered for the entire Saturday Seminar program will have complimentary registration at this conference. More information will follow.

- **Optional Follow-up Program—Are We There Yet?** Date to be Announced

Teachers who participate in the Saturday Seminars will be invited to a follow-up session wherein they will have additional opportunities to share their successes and to collaborate with others to resolve problems and troubleshoot teaching dilemmas.

Time: 9 am -12:30

Location: Transitional Office Building 1731 E. 2nd St.

Individual Registration: \$10 per session, \$50 for all six

School teams of 2 or more, registering for the entire series w/P.O. from the school, \$40 each.

Undergraduates: \$5 per session; \$25 for all six.

Summer Institute:

New Deadline for the Summer Institute: February 15, 2007 (Please encourage qualified colleagues to apply.)

Interviews: February 21, 7:00 – 9:00 TOB

Administrator's Breakfast:

Friday March 16, Alumni Building, 7:30 – 9:00.

Young Writers:

Saturday, March 25, TOB, 9:00 – 3:00

Summer Programs:

Check website for updates on Critical Friends, Professional Learning Communities, and Teacher Research.