

# THE SAWPER

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Winter 2008

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### SAWP Snap

*Ralph Keyes, author of The Courage to Write and other books, tells us that "fear is a normal, inevitable part of the writing process." For many of us it is also part of the teaching process, on the part of both student and teacher. In this issue we examine the theme of Fear.*

## The Fearless Pursuit of Common Sense

### *A Conversation Between Two Activist Friends*

by Dr. Bob Wortman  
and Bev Herman, M.Ed.

#### **BEV:**

Can you believe our friendship goes back 25 years? You were teaching kindergarten, and I was involved with childbirth education and teaching preschool when first we met. I attended a TAEYC Conference (Tucson Association for the Education of Young Children now Southern Arizona EYC) where you made a presentation on "Blocks." Over the years we have both given thousands of volunteer hours to non-profit educational organizations such as Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) and Tucson Area Reading Council (TARC). We have also been public speakers, conference presenters, and of course, writers.

I would say that qualifies us as elders in the Teacher's Club!

*Common sense isn't common in education today.*

*Dr. Janet Allen*

When I suggested we collaborate on an article for *The SAWPER*, you came up with the theme of **Common Sense**. Tell me how you apply common sense in your university classes.

#### **BOB:**

I facilitate learning experiences that support students becoming confident independent and critical readers and writers. I choose literature, materials and strategies that support this goal. I make a point to demonstrate what that practice would look like and try to facilitate reasonable reflection discussions around how that activity might look in a variety of settings (ESL, Adult literacy, 1<sup>st</sup> grade, middle school, etc.)

I read aloud in every class to demonstrate the power of great

*See Fearless Pursuit, p. 4*

# About The SAWPER

*The SAWPER* is published by the Southern Arizona Writing Project (SAWP), an affiliate of the National Writing Project (NWP). *The SAWPER* exists to provide a vital network for the exchange of ideas promoting the most current research and practices in the teaching of writing to ethnically diverse teachers from urban and rural areas of Southern Arizona.

We seek manuscripts from teachers of elementary, secondary and college students on the teaching of writing. Manuscripts may be on classroom ideas, practices, book reviews, in-services, outreach programs, SAWP projects and any issues of concern to writing teachers. In particular we seek articles that focus on what is working in the classroom, although we are also interested in research and theory in the context of teaching writing. Reflective pieces are considered as well as more research-based articles. Each issue is focused around a theme, however manuscripts on a wide variety of topics are always welcome.

As a supportive writing community, we also encourage the submission of short pieces of personal writing in addition to the academic writing discussed above. Personal pieces considered include poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. Student writing is celebrated as well, with short pieces appearing in the *Young Writers* feature.

**Guidelines for submitting manuscripts.** All manuscripts should be electronically submitted as a Word attachment to the editor, Kate Cusumano, at [kmc@email.arizona.edu](mailto:kmc@email.arizona.edu). Please include the words *SAWP submission* in the subject line of your email. Manuscripts should generally be no more than 2,000 words in length and follow MLA style. Shorter articles are welcome. Fiction and creative non-fiction should be kept under 1500 words or less. We are willing to work with you on the length.

When submitting student work, please follow your district policies on parental permission. A release form will be provided upon request. Student pieces should be no more than 1000 words.

For all submissions be sure to include the author's name, address, school affiliation, and a short biography of 2-3 sentences. We cannot publish any material that has been previously published in print or electronic form.

**The deadline for the next newsletter** is May 15th. We encourage you to submit earlier than the deadline. Please see the Call for Manuscripts, page 15, for next issue's theme.

## Southern Arizona Writing Project Board Members

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# Director's Disk

## *Putting Fear Up Front*



By Erec Toso

It is the first day teaching of the spring semester and I am walking to class feeling a mix of anxiety and excitement. It is this way every semester, in spite of twenty-five years of teaching. I am always nervous because I know I cannot control how students will respond to me or to the material or to each other. They are an unknown entity, and the unknown is what scares me, makes my skin creep with anxiety.

Then they are there, in front of me. They are nervous as well for the same reasons that

I am. They are eager to please and some practically jump out of their seats when I ask for some help passing out the syllabus or a hand-out.

After the first day, I can see them, and I can see the work in front of me. I am less anxious because now I know what I am dealing with. My classes have human faces.

There is a saying in Twelve Step programs that "fear" derives from the acronym "Future Events Appear Real." That is to say, I react to something I cannot control but only imagine – the future. I am drawn away from those things I can handle, the tasks in front of me right here, and worry about how things *might* go.

I carry the future with me like a bad habit. My

litany includes the realities of a State budget shortfall of more than \$1.3 billion, and that the reality is that one of the few places to cut are the universities. Within the university, one of the only places to cut is temporary money. I am paid out of temporary money. I see a storm on the horizon and it makes me wonder what will happen to an already damaged course offering at my school.

The fear is a good one, in that I put it in front of me and use it to motivate me to act. I can do what is in front of me, right here, right

now. I cannot predict the future, nor can I control the outcomes. When I see it right here, fear, like my students after the first day, takes on a human face, one that prompts me to work in the ways I am able to connect with others, to band together, and to write our way through the fear to answers that actions will reveal.

As many of you know, Jo Anne Behling, a master teacher and very organized person will be taking over as director of SAWP this coming fall. I do not know for sure what I will be doing, but if I am still at the university, I will continue to be part of SAWP. Thank you all for your support, and let's keep the fear in front of us, in ways that give us courage rather than despair.

*The fear is a good one, in that I put it in front of me and use it to motivate me to act.*

*Fearless Pursuit**Continued from p. 1*

books in our lives as readers and writers. I want my master's and doctoral students to notice and help our kids to notice that reading and writing are reciprocal processes. We think like a writer when we read - we write like a reader when we write.

**BEV:**

Yes, I have those very ideas posted in my classroom: *READ LIKE A WRITER* and *WRITE LIKE A READER*. I think the most powerful example I can set is that of being a reader and a writer myself.

What does common sense look like in your consulting practice?

**BOB:**

Not much different. Reading and writing should always make sense; writing specifically must have strong connections to authenticity (purposes and real audiences).

I share great literature aloud to remind teachers and administrators that reading aloud is the single most important activity that must happen in every classroom every day. Even the National Reading Panel's (NRP) Report which is the Reading "bible" for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Reading First acknowledges that reading aloud is the single activity that can be used to instruct in all 5 pillars of the reading curriculum (as defined by the NRP): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

I share strategy lessons that focus students on becoming confident, independent and critical readers and writers.

I promote the notion that programs do not teach. *Teachers* teach. And great instruction is using our assessments to match materials to

students to help them progress as readers and writers. I do not see my job as one of making teachers have "fidelity to a program"... but of helping teachers reflect on their professional knowledge (even if that means acknowledging what they don't know and need to know more in a given area) to make instructional choices and decisions that will support students in that goal of becoming confident, independent and critical readers and writers.

**BEV:**

I agree. I was honored to have been invited to a

Summer SAWP where I did a Teaching Demonstration for the participants on Reflective Practice. I am currently teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts. We have re-configured Period 3/Core Enrichment to be a Reading Class. We have a scripted program. With my learners which includes me—I am the Head Learner as Dr. Kathy Short advises—each session includes a Read Aloud of great young folk's literature and focuses on meaning. The scripted program is solely decoding. I insist that the kids focus on the *meaning* of the "Challenge Words," two syllable words using the pattern of the day. I also model a critical stance on non-sense in whatever disguise it appears. We will also use our classroom computers as vehicles to do searches on literature connections and author study.

What themes do you find in your work with educators around the country?

**BOB:**

I find that our poorest kids of color get scripted programs that demean teacher knowledge and decision-making and treat kids as incapable of thinking and critically analyzing interesting text... because they are expected not to understand what they read... but only must parrot what they see on the page. Their reading diet is limited and bland.

*Reading and writing should always make sense; writing specifically must have strong connections to authenticity (purposes and real audiences).*

*Fearless Pursuit**Continued from p. 4*

Parents of affluent kids would not stand for this reductionistic curriculum that is devoid of a rich and varied diet of texts that are meaningful and memorable.

**BEV:**

Absolutely! I find diminished creativity in my students. Classroom management-wise, they act/react with what Raza Studies calls microaggressions. I've never been one to "cooperate with my own oppression" so I fully empathize. Would you discuss the vital role of writing in connection with literacy? Also can you address the role of writing in the content areas?

**BOB:**

Writing is always kept separate from reading... when we know that reading and writing are reciprocal and supportive of one another. We treat content areas as though the kids already know how to read math, social studies and science texts that reflect a wider array of genre than just narrative story.

Content teachers feel that it's not their job to teach kids how to read – but to teach content... And then the kids are beat up for not being able to meet successfully the demands of content classes (which require a great deal of reading and writing in order for kids to be successful.)

Writing is the single most important and pervasive literacy activity that is required for jobs that will pay more than minimum wage. But we limit the very kids who would benefit most... the poor kids in high poverty schools... by insisting they spend year after year of phonics instruction (which isn't making the difference that educators feel is meaningful anyway) when they would be better suited to be utilizing phonics knowledge as connected to writing for real purposes to real audiences.

**BEV:**

Let's end on a hopeful note. What counsel and invitations can we as seasoned change agents offer to our colleagues pursuing excellence AND common sense in our respective teaching and literacy practices?

**BOB:**

Everyone must come to grips with what they don't know... and find ways to know more. Professional development is more than spending hours reflecting on test scores that provide no useful information as to assessing what kids actually know... so that you can build on that knowledge. We need to take responsibility for our professional development and take responsibility for being able to articulate how we know what we know and why so that we can regain the trust and respect that teachers once had in this country.

We must join a professional organization like the International Reading Association or National Council of Teachers of English and read the journals and attend conferences. We must reflect on what we read and hear with critical minds and discuss our thinking with our peers. We must find new resources for instruction and assessments that provide experiences that will allow us to learn more as teachers to make reasonable instructional decisions. Conferences like the Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) which will be held this summer in Tucson (*see sidebar on page 6*) or local conferences offered by the Tucson Area Reading Council (TARC) or Tucson Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) are easily accessible.

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**BEV:**

I second those excellent ideas. I would add staying attuned to trends and issues that cause us to "unknow what we know." We *must* intelligently and strategically resist forces that don't

*See Fearless Pursuit, p. 6*

*Writing is always kept separate from reading... when we know that reading and writing are reciprocal and supportive of one another.*

### *Fearless Pursuit*

*Continued from p. 5*

make sense and actually hurt students and the profession. Like those legendary kindergartners, we must stick together! Continuing to come to voice on behalf of public education by listening, speaking, reading and writing in multiple genres—advocacy work to public officials, letters to the editor, poetry, journal articles, conference presentations, books, creating art as well as inviting our students to do the same. Informal and entertaining networking meetings like your “Books with Bob” group where we enjoy sharing literature, anecdotes, and friendship can be sustaining for us. It is daunting to take action in these times of mandates, scripted curriculum, and overemphasis on test scores. Still, we must have hope and belief that common sense will

once again prevail and contribute in every way possible to its welcome return.

Thanks so much, Bob. I have enjoyed this collaboration and look forward to our next twenty five years!

*Bob teaches for the UA in the Department of Language, Reading and Culture and serves as an Educational Consultant. He is well-known around town for his Books with Bob events coordinated through TAWL. Check out his favorite read aloud books at*

*<http://www.bobwortman.com/vita.html>.*

*Bev teaches 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade at Ochoa Elementary in the TUSD. She attended SAWP in 1991, 2003, and 2007. You can reach her at [Tortuga@aol.com](mailto:Tortuga@aol.com).*



**Whole Language Umbrella**  
**Literacies for All Summer Institute**  
July 17-20, 2008  
JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort, Tucson, AZ  
Critical Reflections: Honoring and Nurturing the Whole Child

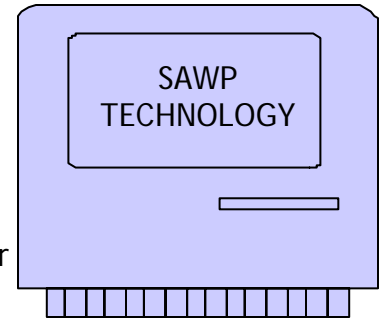
The Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) is a conference of the National Council of Teachers of English dedicated to a view of whole language as a dynamic philosophy of education. WLU is made up of support groups and individual professionals around the world who are interested in developing and implementing whole language in educational settings. WLU also publishes a journal, Talking Points, twice a year.

The 2008 Whole Language Umbrella Literacies for All Summer Institute will be held in Tucson, at the J. PI Marriott Starr Pass Resort, from July 17-20. This exciting event will bring together educators at all levels from across the United States, Canada, Australia, Latin America Japan and other countries. *Many of the speakers will be familiar names to you and include Carol Edelsky, Monica Brown, Kathy Short and Bob Wortman.* For registration, hotel and program information please visit <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/conv/wlu>

Tucson Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) is helping in the planning of the conference. If you can help with the myriad of activities necessary to successfully host this event please contact Caryl Crowell at [ccrowell@tucsontawl.org](mailto:ccrowell@tucsontawl.org).

# Daily Fears, Daily Adventures

By Amethyst Hinton-Sainz



Fearlessness. The absence of fear. In the current environment of district, state and federal obsession with assessment and its implications for classroom practice, it has been a challenge for me to overcome the daily fears that somehow I am not doing enough for my students and embrace the adventure that teaching and learning can be. How can I deny that there are only so many school days, only so many contact hours, during which I can influence my students, put on the pressure, scaffold the learning, “structure the processing” (as my district likes to say), and, of course, assess, assess, assess? More data will lead to better teaching and better learning, right? But what about the fun? What about the adventure? When I first began teaching, I leapt at new opportunities. A new computer lab in the library? I’m there. Geocities? Let’s build a web page. E-mail? It’s free—let’s go for it!!

*I still find that at some point I have to put all my fears aside and just jump in before the moment passes.*

Of course, many of my early attempts to integrate new technology flopped. In 1997, a group of students and I created a whole website for the first high school where I worked, but we had no way to transfer it from one set of computers to the set that had internet access. No CD burner, no zip drive, nothing. Jump drives didn’t even exist! I moved to another school, and all of that student creativity from my first students is probably still on

those hard drives being dismantled and melted down for the metal in some third world country right now. In my first year at my current school, I took my students to the lab to set them up with e-mail so that they could be pen-pals with pre-service teachers in Utah. It didn’t even occur to me that this might be against our technology policy because I was setting them up to have unmonitored communication with adults. It didn’t occur to me that there *was* a technology policy. Today, with all we know about online predators, it’s obvious to me that I should have asked some questions, but then, all I could think about was the *possibilities* in the most positive, idealistic sense.

After these experiences, I have to work to move myself past predicting obstacles when I try a new project with technology. I have to consciously *remind* myself that the possibilities are worth it. And you know what? They are. Though experience and good planning help alleviate complete meltdown, I still find that at some point I have to put all my fears aside and just *jump in* before the moment passes. Without getting fired, of course.

Recently, I’ve been lucky enough to have some wonderful training. Our district brought in the Center for Digital Storytelling, and I was able to attend the NWP Annual Meeting in New York, where Digital Essays, Digital Stories and Digital Compositions seemed to be *everywhere*.

*See Daily Fears, p. 8*

*Daily Fears**Continued from p. 7*

The training has been inspiring, and has once again convinced me to venture into the computer labs for more than EBSCO searches. I haven't yet ventured into the land of digital storytelling and digital portfolios, but I have my dates in the computer lab reserved.

Here are some lessons I've learned along the way. This is a list of reminders for myself as I plan my digital storytelling units, but I thought I'd share them with my SAWP colleagues. If you

*Try doing the same project you expect students to do.*

can make use of them, then all my disasters will have served a purpose:

- Clearly

define your vision and the benchmarks you hope to teach. Then pare everything back. Limit lengths of projects, numbers of images. Limit numbers of projects by grouping students, if possible. The fewer the factors, the fewer the opportunities for all heck to break loose (chaos theory, right?).

- Research your current resources. This includes hardware, software, and of course, the techs. Be very nice to them. They could probably get paid more elsewhere but they chose to stay in your school. We love them. Don't forget about lots of standard software that can do great things: Windows Movie Maker, iMovie, iPhoto, even good ol' PowerPoint can have a soundtrack.

- Try doing the same project you expect students to do.

- Survey your students about specific aspects of technological literacy (what programs they know, do they have a jump drive, etc.). Pair less experienced students with more experienced students. Unless you are an info-tech teacher, you probably won't want to spend oodles of lessons teaching the technology. With

time and some direct teaching, students can figure these programs out fairly intuitively, especially if they have a mentor sitting next to them.

- Give plenty of time for all students to finish in class. Once files start going back and forth between home and school things get lost or don't translate. Give all students a chance to do a good job.
- Do as much of the work outside of the computer lab as you can (scripts, storyboards, etc.).
- Teach digital file organization strategies just as you would notebook organization. Teach students the habit of saving work regularly.
- Have good "sponge" activities in place for when the server goes down, computers freeze, people finish early, someone insists on doing the project at home, etc.
- Keep asking for what you need to use technology in your classroom. We become conditioned to stop asking when we are so often told that the resources don't exist. Sometimes we are surprised at what we can get when we speak up.
- Be mentally ready for a little bit of chaos.

*Amethyst teaches at Catalina Foothills High, Eng. 11 and AP Lang. and Composition, and is one of our SAWP Technology Liaisons. She may be reached at [amethyst\\_sainz@juno.com](mailto:amethyst_sainz@juno.com)*

- Interested in digital storytelling? Go to the Center for Digital Storytelling, <http://www.storycenter.org/>

The SAWPER is looking for articles from teachers who have used digital storytelling in the classroom. Tell us what works, what does not.

# Fearlessness

By Heather Ordover

There is a book I read shortly after arriving in NYC as a third year teacher, *How Children Fail* by John Holt. Yes, it's mostly about elementary school. Yes, it's mostly about math instruction. Yes, by modern standards it's ancient (late Fifties). Yes, he wrote books with more positive titles (*How Children Learn*). Doesn't matter. This is the book that changed it all for me.

I had kids in my classes in NY who were street smart, but not necessarily book-smart. I don't mean that pejoratively. The kids had enormous potential and some of them had family and previous school support that really put them in a good position to succeed. But even our smartest hovered around 1,000 on the SAT. These were kids who had a better, more comprehensive, and more challenging high school curriculum than I ever might have dreamed of in AZ. But they still made mistakes; sometimes enormous ones that looked so...lame to the rest of us.

It would have been very easy to write them off and say, "well, you know...kids like that..." and other teachers would nod sagely, agreeing. Nothing more could be done...But that would have been wrong and unfair. These kids were reading Plato, discussing Thomas Paine, and quoting Gatsby at a college level. Sure, their writing left a lot to be desired, but that was improving too. Why did my kids do so well? Because I helped them see how mistakes helped them learn.

*I helped them see how mistakes helped them*

*We give essay tests and the grades are final, rather than use them as process assignments that can be revised through the end of the semester.*

Lots of teachers quote the history of Thomas Edison to their kids, "Look at how many light bulbs he made that didn't work before he made one that did!" But we don't put our grades where our aphorisms are. We give essay tests and the grades are final, rather than use them

as process assignments that can be revised through the end of the semester (as long as they were handed in on time). We are critical of incorrect answers, "Nope. Wrong. How about you. Do *you* know the right answer?" instead of supportive, "Oooh, *close*, I know why you said that but you're not quite there...wanna try again?"

Illustrating my point in the most painful way possible, I had the unique opportunity to visit "the best teachers" in a large metropolis on the eastern seaboard while writing curriculum for that city. The failure rates in the city were staggering and compounded by the 48% intra-district transfer rate. Students moved during the year from school to school to school. During an audit it was discovered that for the 54 high schools, there were over *one thousand* separate courses being taught.

The cumulative effect of this was that a student who moved school to school six times during their junior year could easily read *Catcher in the Rye* six times and call it an education.

*See Fearlessness, p. 10*

*Fearlessness**Continued from p. 9*

Everyone pointed fingers at the other person. Admin blamed the teachers; teachers blamed the students or the parents; everyone blamed politicians and funding. For me the whole mess coalesced into one important moment for me. Watching one of “the best” teachers teaching Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” to a class of Grade 9 English students I witnessed exactly the kind of train wreck that would have given Holt an aneurism.

*(The teacher) would have modeled that this kind of risk is not only okay, it’s impossible to learn without them.*

The teacher told the class that before they read the story she wanted to go over some vocabulary, “today we’ll study the etymology of these words.” A slouching, handsome, African American boy to the right of me asked, “Why we learnin’ ‘bout *bugs*?” My jaw dropped. How often do you find a ninth grader who knows the Latin term for the study of insects!? Sadly, the teacher turned slowly, stared down the student, and spoke as though to a small, deaf child, “No...no...we’re studying *vocabulary* today...you know...*words*?!” I wasn’t sure what to do. Technically I couldn’t do anything but sit there and watch that poor kid tune her out for the rest of the class. And why wouldn’t he. You would, right?

Now, if she’d read Holt’s book and didn’t know what entomology meant, the first words out of her mouth might have been, “Why do you think we’re studying bugs?” If she *did* know the word, she might have said, “Wow! That’s a brilliant mistake to make! You’re like *one* letter off! Does everyone know the difference between the two words Jonnel just referenced

to?” She could have used the mistake as a teachable moment for the class regardless of whether she knew the word or not. And her listening would have demonstrated how much she valued her students more than reciting any trite teaching aphorism. She would have risked being wrong or making a mistake in front of the class—and through that act, she would have modeled that this kind of risk is not only okay, it’s impossible to learn without them.

When the class ended I ran after him, tugged on his sleeve and said, “Hey, dude, *genius* mistake back there! *Etymology* and *Etymology*. You’re awfully smart!” The smile on his face was slow to come but worth a fortune to me. We learn from our students when we have the courage to listen.

The most fearless moment, though, was listening to a kid who’d been a complete idiot all year in class. Truly, I don’t say that lightly. He was headed for Juvie—almost made it too. But halfway through the year he came in and recited a poem by Byron—memorized. A nice little recitation of it, too. All my carping at him, all

*Perhaps if we spent a little more time being fearless role models—showing kids how to risk ... and less time worrying about which of the latest teaching fads we ascribe to ...*

my efforts to get him to do the work, none of it mattered until we hit the Romantics and something spoke to him in a way that nothing else had. So I listened. I stopped hassling him. I praised him. I treated him *not* like a special case, but like he’d always been a straight A student—not to embarrass him, but to let him get a sense of what it’s like to be *right* for a change—for it to be *normal* for him to be right.

*See Fearlessness, p. 11*

Too often when kids try to turn it around we make a federal case out of it. Just listen. Respond. They'll appreciate it.

We pay a lot of lip service in educational circles to valuing the students. I don't see a whole lot of that on my school visits. In fact, the publishing house I work for now—one of the ones people love to think is full of Minions of Evil trying to Corrupt Pure Education—yeah, we're generally the *only* ones in the meeting rooms who are talking about the kids; certainly the only ones speaking about them positively. I spent ten years teaching with a small reference library behind me—my own books. A kid asked a question I didn't know the answer to, my response was always, "Great Question! I have no idea. Look it up...um...here," and I'd toss a book to her. Modelling. Teacher theorists spend an ungodly amount of ink trying to find ways to

improve student self-esteem and worth. You know what makes kids feel good? Learning does. And more than that, showing you and their parents that they learned makes them feel *really* good. Perhaps if we spent a little more time being fearless role models—showing kids how to risk, and listen, and make mistakes and *learn*—and less time worrying about which of the latest teaching fads we ascribe to, our kids would listen more, be engaged more readily, and trust us more immediately.

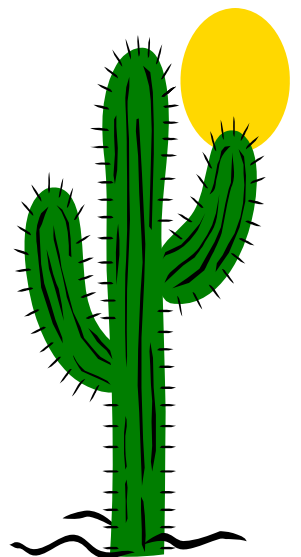
Maybe.

*Heather teaches anything to anyone who stands still long enough to listen. Of late she teaches knitting, spinning, and weaving, though she'll probably head back to teach literature and writing in the Fall.*

## *Desert Living Is Different!*

*Desert Living Is Different!* is to be a 100-page environmental guidebook to the Sonoran desert, written and illustrated by K-12 students, with a focus on educating newcomers about living in our desert eco-system. The *Desert Living Is Different!* project has received over 350 entries from twenty-three schools representing eight school districts in our area. Entries are being judged by a SAWP committee composed of SAWP Fellows Sharon Miller, Mary Carmen Cruz Orr, Kitty Reeve, Flory Simon and SAWP intern Faith Kurtyka. Much appreciation, and, at times laughter, has been elicited by the unexpected and delightful creativity of the students' work. Finalists will be announced in

April. Certificates for creativity and environmental awareness will be given to all students who submitted work. SAWP will print and distribute free to newcomers 30,000 copies of the finished guidebook through Realtors, mortgage companies and property managers. Ultimately, the *Desert Living Is Different!* Guidebook will have its own website, with links from the SAWP website.



# First Year Fears:

## Some Words I Wrote My First Year

By Kirsten Wimpenny Conrad

I have found my experiences as a teacher to be a series of patterns of darkness and light. I continue to walk through these patterns because there is no choice, or perhaps because there are too many choices. Often I feel terrified and isolated. I feel as if I am the only teacher in the school who really has no idea what she is doing, and as soon as those doors close and class starts I become the foremost transgressor. I transgress against these kids' minds and their futures because I presume to have enough knowledge to be able to lead them responsibly. Secretly, I know the woods are dark, and I have only a dim light that shines not even a few feet in front of us. I bravely look back at the students, smiling my best leader's smile, as if I can see an entire landscape of rich, vivid color, florid veins of life, exotic animals and plants pulsing with opportunity, and if they just follow me, they can have it all, and nothing will be impossible for them.

In reality, nothing is there but tangles of undergrowth and that small light, showing me little more than what is right in front of my eyes. They can have only what their own work and comprehension can give them. But I keep thinking that if I could only show them the right way or say the right thing, I will have dug up their holy grail, wiped the soil off it, and handed it to them. I will have pulled them forward into the blinding light of endless opportunity. I will have opened their eyes for them.

But even if I could open their eyes, what

good is prying a baby's eyes open before it is ready? Some animals are born with their eyes closed, and if the mother were to pry them open, they would be too dazzled with light, forms, and shapes. The baptism of knowledge would crash through the red membrane of security and sleep, frightening them backward out of consciousness, toward blindness. Blindness is a place of safety, and we don't leave its bower until we are strong enough to walk on our own two legs.

Perhaps I imagine myself with too much power. I am sure I do. In some ways I want more power than I could ever have, because I want to change the world. I want to be the superhero. I want to fly in with my red cape on and show the students the enormous power of words, and their intense beauty. I want to heap upon their plates the skill of rich communication until they are gluttoned and cannot eat another bite.

Obviously I am selfish to want all the glory. The true hero doesn't want to save at all. He wants to inspire the weak to save themselves. Or, even more, he does not imagine himself to be the strong one, only the one who could, and did.

I hate my students in some ways. I hate them for throwing rocks and flipping rubber bands all over the room. I hate them for their constant clamor, their dirty looks and snotty comments, their terrifying laziness. I hate them

*See First Year, p. 13*

*I am alone even though  
there are 30 young people in  
the room with me.*

for their excuses. I hate them for lying bold-faced to me so often, as if I am some kind of a drooling moron, and cannot trust what my own two eyes see right in front of my face. *But Miss, I didn't do anything. I don't know who threw the rock.* I hate them for not telling me they don't understand an assignment, and then making Mommy and Daddy call me on their behalf to bail water out of their little leaky lie-boat with the big, bubblegummed hole in the middle. I hate their pathetic excuses. They believe only in their own weakness, and in manipulating others in order to ensure that their weakness does not transform into strength and ability. Why fight with such conviction to remain an ugly duckling when you can become a swan?

What I hate about some of them more than anything else is how intent they are on pulling themselves and everyone else in the room off task from the moment they walk through the door. Do they despise their education, their opportunity? Do they despise the notion of rising to skill and power in this world through sharpening the holy, sacred sword of words? I don't understand. To me, this is unconscionable. How could any man choose blindness over sight? Ignorance over knowledge? Rocks and rubber bands over the joining of men through greater understanding, and the pleasure and sheer joy of words? Like pigs gorging themselves from the trough of their own doom. My job is to stand up there day in and day out throwing pearls to pigs, and hoping they find one or two not to trample or choke on, or break to bits in their teeth.

So that's why I am alone even though there are 30 young people in the room with me. I am alone because Eve ate the apple. I am alone because I have chosen an enormous responsibility. Like a king who sits with his head in his

hands worrying about his kingdom in war, I worry about the efficacy of my teaching. I worry about what I choose to teach, and how I choose to teach it. I strain to determine why I am so highly creative, yet cannot come up with interesting activities that relate to the subject matter.

Oftentimes I come across an activity that sounds fun, but that doesn't seem to have an educational objective. For example, I was once surfing for activities to teach *Lord of the Flies* and I stumbled upon a lesson that required the students to learn about the scientific name for the Conch shell, learn the habits of the Conch snail and then draw a big poster of a Conch. How can this possibly relate to the novel? The novel is not about the habits of the Conch. Why is this teacher demeaning the novel?

But now, I think, you know, the kids have got to attack literature from an easy angle to gain access to it before they can reach the depths of it, the cool parts. There has to be an easy access point, a wading pool of sorts before it gets deep. Otherwise, you're just speaking a completely different language. But where is that hidden cove? That point of entry? I cannot just stay here down the shore calling to them, in a place from which all they can see is a tiny point of light flailing its arms desperately. I love every single student with such wild desperation... I must gain access to my kids to save my own life.

*Kirsten Wimpenny Conrad teaches in the Vail School District where she attended a SAWP workshop last summer.*

*... I think ... the kids have got to attack literature from an easy angle to gain access to it before they can reach the depths of it, the cool parts.*

# Fellow Writers: SAWP Fellows Get Published

*Many of our SAWP Fellows have been busy writing. Due to space requirements only the most recent work can be printed.*

**Sharon K. Miller**, has added two publications to her name: "Exploring the Nature of Theory in a Teacher Research Community," in *The Thinking Classroom/Peremena*, October, 2006 (an educational journal published in English and Russian for an international teaching and learning community), and "Effective Writing for Teacher Researchers," co-written with Janet C. Richards, in [\*Teachers Taking Action: A Comprehensive Guide to Teacher Research\*](#) (2008). Cynthia A. Lassonde and Susan E. Israel, Editors, published by IRA. Some of her other publications have been previously highlighted in this publication and can be found online.

**Deborah O'Dowd's** most recent work is the newly released *Fashion Fighter*, her first children's novel. Published in 2007, it won the iUniverse Editor's Choice Award, which entitles her book representation at the New Title Showcase Conference at BookExpo America in Los Angeles as well as the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany this summer. *Fashion Fighter* is an anti-war, pro-veteran and pro-humanity children's novel set in the Roskruge Escuela Bilingue/West University neighborhood in Tucson. Check it out at [www.fashionfighter.net](http://www.fashionfighter.net). Deborah attended the SAWP Summer Institute in 2003 and has other books to her name. They can be found by googling her name.



*(Editor's note: Deborah has been invited to write an article for the next issue of The SAWPER on publishing your work on iUniverse.)*

**Heather Ordover's** most recent work appears on Cast-on, an online blog. See Episodes 21,34,36,39 and 48 at [www.Cast-on.com](http://www.Cast-on.com). Heather attended SAWP Summer Institute 2007. Googling her name in will reveal additional books and articles to her name as well.

**Kate Cusumano**, SAWP Summer Institute 2006, has had an article, "What I Learned from Teaching Marisol," published in *Arizona English Bulletin*, Volume 49, Number 2, Fall 2007.

*If you have recent publications that have not been recognized in The SAWPER please send the information to the editor at [kmc@email.arizona.edu](mailto:kmc@email.arizona.edu). Be sure to include the year you attended the Summer Institute as well as the pertinent bibliographical information.*

## Young Writers' Workshop

April 26th, from 9:00-3:30, the Transitional Office Building will be the site of a Young Writers' Workshop entitled *Writing Ourselves*, which will focus on autobiographical forms including poetry, creative fiction and other forms of sign systems. Participants will have the opportunities to explore their own identity and history through these forms. Podcasting may be explored if time allows. Featured speakers will be announced at a future date. For more information you may email Debbie Dimmett at [deborah\\_dimmett@msn.com](mailto:deborah_dimmett@msn.com).

## *From the Editor . . .*

It was so quiet I wouldn't have believed I was on busy Fourth Avenue if I hadn't just parked in front of that eclectic purple and orange building and walked a block down here to Casa Libre en la Solana for the *Writing for Your Life* workshop with Rita Maria Magdalena. This was my first visit to the writers' retreat located in the heart of Tucson, but I know I'll be back. Casa Libre is a haven where writers can come for a self-directed writing residency. They are provided with a private suite, high speed internet, printer and other amenities, including access to a pool and Jacuzzi out in the walled garden. Residencies are free to writers at all levels from novice to professional. I took my writing class that morning, learning new ways to transfer images held in memory into written words on the page, ways that will be useful to me as both a teacher and as a writer. But I also pushed away a fear, the fear that I'm not really a writer, that I can't really put the stories I want to tell on paper. In those few hours in the library of Casa Libre I felt the energy of all the writers who have stayed there in the two years since it opened. Writing to prompts that morning reminded me of the energy of the TOB where we attended our SAWP Summer Institute. Writing comes more easily for me for me when I am in a community of writers. How about for you?

If you're in need of a recharge of your writing batteries, I encourage you to look to the many resources for writers in our community. Casa Libre offers workshops, salon nights, readings (where even novices like us may read our work) and other activities, besides the growing library of writing materials. Find them at [www.casalibre.org](http://www.casalibre.org). Another avenue for growth as a writer is in taking the creative writing classes at Pima Community College. I am taking my second writing course from Meg Files at the Pima West campus. All students in that class, mainly people with advanced degrees, are writing book-length projects such as novels, novellas or collections of short stories. Her yearly Writers' Workshop provides opportunities to learn new techniques, consult with professional writers and agents, and, of course, to write. Teachers of writing will come away with fresh ideas to implement in class. You may even submit a manuscript for a free consultation with an agent or published author. This year's workshop will be held May 30th-June 1st. See [pima.edu](http://pima.edu) for more details. (At press time their website was not updated for this year's conference, but it will be shortly.)

*Kate Cusumano*

## *Call for Manuscripts*

### Spring/Summer 2008—Joyful Revision

How can we revise our beliefs, teaching strategies, what we know about our students? Revising our writing, our teaching, our lives.

### Fall 2008—Rocks and Gems in the Current of Your Writing/Teaching Life

Did that "rock" impeding your stream turn out to be a gem?

# Voices in the Village

The second annual *Voices in the Village Teacher Research Conference* will be held on May 3, 2008, from 9:00-4:00 in the Modern Languages Building at the University of Arizona. This year's keynote speaker is Susan L. Lytle, Ph.D. Language in Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Lytle is the Chair of the Language and Literacy in Education Division, Director of the Program in Reading/Writing/Literacy, and a Founding Director of the Philadelphia Writing Project.

Additionally featured will be teacher researchers from our own Teacher Research and Inquiry Institute, Sunnyside Unified School District Career Ladder Program, the UA Department of Language, Reading and Culture, teacher researchers from the Great Basin (NV) Writing Project, The Southern Nevada Writing Project, Kennesaw Mountain (GA) Writing Project, Northern Arizona University, Cave Creek Schools and the Bureau of Indian Affairs School District. Please join us for an informative and inspiring day. Details and registration forms may be found at the conference website <http://teacher.research.sawp.googlepages.com/teacherresearchinsouthernarizona>, or through the SAWP website <http://sawp.web.arizona.edu/TeacherResearchConference.htm>. For questions you may email Sharon Miller at [skmiller@email.arizona.edu](mailto:skmiller@email.arizona.edu).

# SAWP Summer Institute

Since 1978, K-University teachers have attended SAWP each summer to work together to

become part of a network of Writing Project fellows. Participation in the project offers teachers a change to reinforce and fine tune good teaching of writing, to develop and try new approaches, and to experience professional renewal. We welcome teachers who are eager to demonstrate their best teaching practices, work on their own writing, and share in a supportive and collegial setting. Full scholarships for 6 full graduate credits in English/LRC 597A to attend this year's institute are still available. All K-University teachers with three years experience are eligible. For more information contact Erec Toso at [netoso@u.arizona.edu](mailto:netoso@u.arizona.edu) or 520-621-3436.

# Young Authors' Camp



The Tucson GEAR UP Project has partnered with SAWP to develop a summer transition program for our 8<sup>th</sup> grade writers called *Young Authors Camp*. This program will include rigorous, creative, and relevant writing assignments designed to get the students ready for high school writing classes while familiarizing them with the University of Arizona campus and resources. Classes will be held at the UA Poetry Center from 9am to 12pm each day, June 2-18. Classes will be led by SAWP Fellow Alyssa Covington and a UA graduate student from the College of Humanities. The curriculum will be shared with GEAR UP and SAWP teachers and administrators. Young Authors' Camp will culminate in a celebration event on June 18. Details to follow. Please contact Anna Varley at [varley@email.arizona.edu](mailto:varley@email.arizona.edu) with questions or suggestions.