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## Teachers learn to be as good as their words

**By Rhonda Bodfield**

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Say two names — Krongaz and Syooloomi. Note the kick-in-teeth of the consonants and the creamy mouth-feel of the vowels. Now, who would you guess was warlike and who peaceful?

What's the difference between authority and power — and can you have one without the other?

How can art — or even just scribbling — help wring words from their dark, amorphous place of origin?

These are some of the questions being asked as about two dozen teachers work through a five-week summer institute sponsored by the Southern Arizona Writing Project, a University of Arizona site of the National Writing Project.

The goal is to help teachers, who receive tuition waivers for six graduate credits, develop their own voices as writers, and bring that new confidence to the classroom to better reach their students.

Each morning, they have one hour to find out if the blank computer screen or piece of paper will win. The victors share.

For the rest of the day, they stage teaching demonstrations, listen to guest lectures and discuss research.

Alone, in small groups, as a collective unit, they coach, prompt, question, suffer and stretch.

"The idea is to bring experienced teachers with practical knowledge and wisdom into the discussion to address what's ailing instruction," said Erec Toso, a writing teacher at the UA and a co-director of the program.

With laptops, notebooks, projectors and books all competing for space on tables in front of them, and words scrawled on papers taped to the windows, it may not look much like what Toso calls "a taste of teaching paradise," but he said the modest setting belies the super-charged work being done.

"Our work is part of a remedy to problems that beset the teaching of writing," Toso said. "Classrooms can have this kind of enthusiasm and motivation if teachers re-create what we do here in their classrooms."

Nine recent studies have found improvement of students whose teachers participated in National Writing Project professional development, particularly in the development of ideas and organization.

The participants don't all teach English. Some are brand-new at the job, looking for answers to those how-am-I-supposed-to-pull-this-off questions. Others are veterans who are still asking the same thing years into the job.

Valerie Fisher, 23, just wrapped up her first year as a teacher, teaching English to sophomores in the Sunnyside Unified School District.

### Interested in participating?

Recruitment for next summer's institute will soon be under way. Generally, teachers are asked for a résumé, a letter of recommendation and a personal statement describing professional development goals and how the writing project would help. Go to [sawp.web.arizona.edu](http://sawp.web.arizona.edu) for more information on the Southern Arizona Writing Project.

"I wouldn't say it was a disaster, but it didn't go as well as I'd hoped," she said. "Their writing improved, but I just felt that it didn't improve enough and that I didn't teach them what they needed to be taught."

Fisher, who flat-out stopped writing so she could get through grading and lesson plans, said the institute hasn't come without pain. The blank screen was intimidating initially, she said. And she worried that in a room full of creative writers, her own writing was a bit juvenile.

"It was intimidating to hear others read their stuff and then hear mine."

She said, though, that she has learned to enjoy her writing and not to judge herself so harshly. The writing comes more easily now that she has cast aside the self-imposed restraint that she had to have a story fleshed out in her mind before she sat down to write.

"There's always something to write about," she said. "It might be that you got stopped for speeding to get to class, or it might be a trip to the dog park. Any part of your life can become a story."

"Ultimately, my teaching is going to improve dramatically," she said, adding she hopes to re-create in her own classroom the elixir of collegiality, support, safety and buzz that she's found at the workshop.

Hedwig Dennis,

45, who instructs sophomores and juniors at Catalina Foothills High School, has been teaching for 15 years.

She left school this year feeling a little flat, as though her students just went through the motions on their "Great Gatsby" essays. She was hoping there would be more rooting around, more stirring, more sweat.

"I guess more than anything, I wanted to break away from some of the more traditional approaches to certain types of writing to really get students to respond to literature," she said.

She's kicking around the idea of assigning deeper analysis on smaller pieces next time. She's thinking of setting up blogs to prompt more literary dialogue. And she wants to employ more of a workshop approach so students have more chances to share and present their work.

"In all honesty, this is all so new that I'm still processing it, so I'm not 100 percent sure what it will look like in the end," she said. "It has left me with more questions than I started out with, but that's not a bad thing."

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