

# WRITING(S) ON THE WALL

Volume 3, Issue 2

*Newsletter for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Writing Project at  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania  
Spring 2008*

## Northeastern Pennsylvania Writing Project Annual Spring Conference



*Rita Williams-Garcia*



*Presenters Nora Goodwin, Amber Hyder, Scott Gibson, Todd Sharrow,  
Elyse Vitchers, Beth Ward and Jean S. Casamassima*

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Writing Project held its third annual conference, *The Writing(s) on the Wall: Cultivating Change* on Saturday, March 29, 2008 on the campus of East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. Area K-16 teachers and pre-service teachers from across the disciplines attended.

NPWP Summer Institute 2007 fellows presented interactive break-out sessions which focused on the connections between teaching, writing, and student success. Elyse Vitchers, a fifth grade teacher from Bushkill Elementary, led "Exploratory Talk and Fifth Grade Writers." Nora Goodwin, a K-5 librarian at Smithfield Elementary School, led "References, Research and Personal Writing in the Library." Amber Hyder, a ninth and tenth grade English teacher at Greater Nanticoke Area High School, facilitated "Imagery and Vocabulary: Making Words Mean in High School." Todd Sharrow, an eleventh grade English teacher from Abington Heights, shared "Emotional Investment and High School Writers." Beth Ward, a drama and tenth grade English teacher from Pocono Mountain East High School led "At Risk Students and Memoir in High School." Scott Gibson, who instructs Freshman English at the Univer-

sity of North Carolina, Greensboro, facilitated "Composing Stereotypes in College: Perception, Reception and Response." Jean S. Casamassima, a second grade teacher at Arlington Elementary, shared "Using Children's Literature to Teach Writing." The Sessions offered hands on activities and ample round table discussion to share questions/ideas/implications.

This year's conference featured author Rita Williams-Garcia as Keynote Speaker. Williams-Garcia's books focus on issues pertinent to American teens: race, sex, economics, and peer pressure. Kathleen O'Dean named *Like Sisters on the Homefront* as one of "Fifty Outstanding Young Adult Books," and Williams-Garcia is the winner of ALA Best Book for Young Adults, the ALA Booklist Best Book of the Year award, the PEN/Norma Klein Award and a Coretta Scott King Honor medal.

Rita Williams-Garcia shared writing samples from reluctant writers. She then led conference participants in similar writing activities using objects from memory as prompts. The exercise was both personal and professional as the teachers can now bring it back to their classrooms for use with their own reluctant writers.

## *From the Director Lucy Stanovick*

### **Teaching Grammar in Context**

I've been teaching language arts for a long time now, and there are some things I feel urgently passionate about. First, I am certain about the essential interconnectedness between writing, engaging diversity and student success. Yet, I repeatedly come into contact with teachers who want to put this into action but have no mechanism for how to enact the interconnectedness. In these next few newsletters, I want to address some practical strategies because it is the teacher who will empower student voice and save our schools from the oppressive, silencing agents they are becoming.

I am often asked *how to effectively teach grammar and mechanics*. I want to offer a few practical concepts and strategies that on the surface seem simple, but the implications for engaging diversity and increasing the purpose and relevance of grammar and mechanics run deep. When I use the term grammar, I am referring to what Martha Koln (1996) described as “*school grammar*—traditional, Latin-based, eight-parts-of-speech variety, heavy on prescriptive rules and drills and error-correction exercises” (p. 26), and what Patrick Hartwell (1985) called “usage” or “linguistic etiquette” (105-27). First, all language is contextual—home, neighborhood, playground, peer, church, work, and/or school. The language used in one context is not inherently more “right” or “good” than any other. Teachers must make students aware of this and make clear that “school grammar” is simply part of the language used in academic settings. The *point* of “school grammar” is in its relationship to *writing* in that it is the language of academic success, and if students know it, then they can more easily communicate in academic settings. “School grammar” is not inherently “more correct” than any other kind of grammar. I am advocating that we teach grammar *in the context of writing*. Worksheets of random sentences do not constitute *writing*. If the goal of writing is to communicate an idea, whether transactionally or poetically (Britton), then “school grammar” becomes a tool for the writer—a way to help the writer say what she wants to say. Below are a few practical suggestions to start teaching ‘school grammar’ in the context of writing. These do not have to be disconnected from the rest of what you do in class.

1. Use students’ own writing to teach concepts. Use short writing prompts in class. Collect and read them,

looking for a common “school grammar” issue you would like to address. Not all of them, one or two. Do a mini-lesson to teach the concept. Ask students beforehand if you can use their writing to teach a concept, provided you keep their names off of the work. Make overheads of parts or the entire student writing, and then together, as a class, use the writing to teach the concept. Use student samples that show the “school grammar” concept used correctly and ones that can be corrected. If you want students to write a short piece and then you want them to identify, for example, nouns or introductory clauses, I suggest you let them write one day, and have them write every other line, so it is easier to see and read. Then the next day, have them label, so you give them that little



bit of distance from their writing. No matter what you do, these short writings should stay in a writing portfolio and should be part of the writing curriculum. These can be pre-writes or early drafts of pieces the students will later choose to turn into finished pieces.

2. Create prompts that ask students to write for different language contexts (home, neighborhood, Internet) and then share how the “school grammar” shifts and changes, based on the context, and how it can still be ‘right.’ Teachers can use this opportunity to respect differences and teach the malleable and social nature of language rather than reinforce a positivist notion that “school grammar” is the universal “right” way.

3. Have students read aloud parts of text that contain “school” punctuation and/or grammatical errors. Find or prepare a short piece of writing that is high interest but contains “school” grammatical errors that could confuse an interpretation or make it hard to follow. Give each student a copy and have students take turns reading it aloud. Discuss any trouble students may have reading and/or interpreting it, why, and ways a writer could alleviate the problem. Troubleshoot together.

4. Have students punctuate unpunctuated text. This is a bit like the previous strategy. Provide students with a published piece of writing, high interest, which you have re-typed, eliminating all punctuation and capital letters. Have students, in pairs punctuate it and then,

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## Deputy Director travels South to Observe SI07 Fellow Scott Gibson: Part II

Leslie Antonette, Deputy Director

After Scott finished his class we walked over to the faculty club to meet with his fellow graduate assistants (GAs) who were also teaching assistants (TAs). I spoke with them about the writing model I have designed, the Multicultural Response Paradigm (MRP). I introduced the model and asked them to use it to respond to a scene from the film *Crash*. The MRP addresses many of the fundamental issues, currently identified as problems, present in critical literacy philosophies. It provides the teacher with information that allows instruction to be individualized because it can address readers “where they are” emotionally, psychologically and educationally; it offers an alternative model for addressing difficult social issues that are often identified as uncomfortable and/or unnecessary; and, finally because of the previous two functions, it allows students to feel empowered in their reading experience (Dozier, 2006, P. 166). The meeting with the GAs and TAs went well and a few promised to try to use parts of the MRP and to let me know how it worked. I am looking forward to their responses.

Later in the evening, Scott, his lovely wife Christina, my husband Steve, and I went for dinner at a Mexican restaurant on Elm Street in the heart of downtown Greensboro and the just up the street from



the famous Woolworths sit in site. On February 1, 1960 four Black students walked into the “For Whites Only” Woolworth store, sat down at the counter and ordered doughnuts, sodas, and coffee. Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair Jr. and David Richmond set fire to the burgeoning Civil Rights movement when they refused to leave as ordered and inspired even more young Black Americans to follow in their footsteps. Outside the Woolworth building today are their footsteps memorialized in bronze. These four young men brought Jim Crow laws in Greensboro to a full stop on that day.

Scott and I took pictures with each other and our spouses outside the building, now being renovated as a Civil Rights museum and, for me, the visit seemed to turn full circle. What Scott had done in his class that morning was a continuation of the work those young men had started in 1960. I was both saddened by the thought that the work still needed to be done and gladdened by the thought that there are dedicated multicultural educators in American schools who are willing to do the hard work of continuing to teach American citizens how to not only talk about social justice but to actually be able to live it.

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looking at it on screen (overhead or LCD), have the class share how they went about punctuating the text. This allows a conversation for the idea that there is more than “right” way to do it; that the punctuation choices affect the interpretation, and it also provides a forum for reinforcing some “school grammar” rules.

For more ideas, two wonderful resources, which are full of innovative and practical teaching strategies, include Constance Weaver’s *Teaching Grammar in Context* and Harry Noden’s *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*.

## Finding Your Voice: A Professional Support Experience for New Teachers

Discuss

- Curriculum
- Lesson plan implementation
- Parent-teacher communication
- Classroom management
- Inclusion, IEP/GIEP accommodations and compliance
- Assessment
- Self doubt and self esteem

Questions? Feel free to contact us at 570-422-3753

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[www.esu.edu/npwp](http://www.esu.edu/npwp)

## PA Writing Project Network Updates

Jennifer Marmo, SI 2005

The Pennsylvania Writing Project Network (PWPN) met on March 8, 2008 at Penn State Harrisburg. The majority of the meeting was about the upcoming NWP Spring Meeting in Washington, DC. Plans were made regarding meeting state legislators and letting them know how integral NWP is to the state of Pennsylvania. The upcoming Summer Institutes and the recruiting involved were hot topics as well. This led to discussions revolving

around stipends, tuition reimbursement, and leveraging teacher talent post-institute.

All sites shared promotional materials ranging from flyers and brochures to posters and pens. The technology committee once again discussed the PWPN Wiki as well as having a “distance meeting” next year to alleviate travel concerns during the winter months. The publications committee created a spreadsheet entitled “Areas of Expertise” and hope that individual sites will share the knowledge of their TCs so that a resource directory can be compiled.

## With Gratitude for What I Have Learned

Rosalyn Finlayson (aka Rosi), SI 2006

It is through my experiences with NPWP that I have learned to examine the topic of diversity in our society. NPWP has encouraged me to self-evaluate my perspective and to be open to the perspective of others. In doing so, I have further developed the skill of empathy and compassion. By nature, I am a person who likes to avoid controversy and will seek the amicable solution if at all possible. My nature has been at times to my advantage and at other times to my detriment depending upon the type of people I am dealing with. In sorting through how to approach writing about my experiences in relation to diversity, my NPWP mentors have taught me how to cut through the noise of hurt, pain and anger to get to the real issue at hand in hopes of becoming a catalyst for change rather than a

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### Register Now

*PSED 571: Transforming the Research Paper: A Northeastern PA Writing Project Open Institute.*

July 21-25, 2008 10am–1pm

One graduate credit

Can be taken for credit or non-credit

### ATTENTION!

We are updating our files! Please contact us with new email or snail mail information! Contact Karen Jackson Petersen at [kjp1npwp@ptd.net](mailto:kjp1npwp@ptd.net)

Check us out at

[www.esu.edu/npwp](http://www.esu.edu/npwp)

## NPWP TC Engages Authenticity in Her Classroom: Personal History and Writing

As part of Kelly DeVita’s (SI 2005) Holocaust literature unit at Swiftwater Intermediate School, she invited a local Holocaust survivor, Mr. Tom Breslauer, to speak with her class. The response to his incredible story of strength and hope was deeply engaging for her and her students. Later, the children were eager to write a letter of gratitude for the visit. Kelly says that it was a great opportunity to model the writing process with a real and valid purpose. She and her students brainstormed ideas as a group for the collective class letter. Then using a projector and laptop computers, the students drafted a letter which incorporated all of their ideas. They continued with the writing process as the students participated in the revision and editing of the letter. The students were able to reach out to a member of the community, learn about his personal story of the Holocaust, and write with a meaningful purpose.

## Demystifying Poetry: Successful April Saturday Session

Rosalyn Finlayson (SI 2006) led a workshop which presented a series of strategies to help reluctant readers learn how to appreciate poetry, hone their skills in interpreting text, make personal connections to the text and ultimately write their own poetry. The session began with an acrostic in which the participants and presenter introduced themselves. After breaking the ice with informal introductions, workshop attendees participated in a series of activities which included discussions about poetic devices, free verse, connecting poetry to background knowledge, stories, lyrics and visuals. A five step strategy for the Visual Think Aloud process was demonstrated through a video created by Rosalyn. Workshop participants created their own visual think aloud poem as a culminating activity.



*Rosalyn Finlayson shares her Visual Think Aloud process with attending teachers*

Check out this Poetic Devices Resource:

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june00/poetryboxrules.html#>

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participant in a historic ongoing cycle.

As a woman of color in a public school system, I have encountered behaviors that could be read as “ignorant or “mean and despicable” perhaps you can think about some of these incidents with me and decide for yourself what the motivation may have been behind them.

- Labeling a person of color as a “trouble maker” who pulls the race card if they dare to address an injustice.
- Describing a person of color as having “attitude” if she refuse to accept rude and condescending comments.
- Believing that a person of color is a liar if she tells you that neither her background nor current lifestyle involves poverty, promiscuity or drugs.
- Covering up discriminatory behavior by pretending to befriend a person of color.

I would guess that anyone reading this piece has either witnessed or participated in these kinds of behaviors. They are difficult to avoid. If you do recognize any of these situations I ask you to remind yourself that there are human beings involved on both sides, that no one is perfect and that no one deserves to be hurt by colleagues. I would urge you, as I have done, to step in or speak up. It is only scary for the first few moments, but it is so very rewarding to know that you have played a part in creating a healthy work environment and protected some individuals from attack and other individuals from themselves.

Special  
Announcements

Congratulations  
to  
**Karen Jackson  
Petersen** for  
completing her  
Masters in Secondary  
Education at  
ESU!

~~~~~  
Congratulations  
to  
**Jennifer Marmo!**  
She has been  
named  
Regional District  
Keystone Tech-  
nology Integrator.

**NPWP**  
*Teachers  
Teaching  
Teachers*

**Knee-to-Knee Saturday Session: A  
Strategy for Understanding Our-  
selves in Order to Understand Others**

Sue Rasely, Co-Director

After a general introduction of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Writing Project by Director, Lucy Stanovick, our first Saturday session began with a self-evaluation. The facilitator, Deputy Director Leslie Antonette, paired participants in silent groups. They were asked to describe themselves physically, culturally, and nationally in writing. Then they were to describe their partner the same way. After, all shared with their partner their own description and had the option of sharing what they wrote about their partner. This allowed each of us to recognize the ways we assess people before we even hear them speak—the assumptions and judgments our minds automatically make about the people we encounter every day.

Leslie asked us to write about our experience with the exercise—anything that might have surprised us about our partner or the process. We were asked to consider our level of comfort or discomfort with the process. Lucy encouraged us to writing our thoughts without just answering questions or editing our thoughts. Through free-writing, we might be able to discover something about ourselves by allowing writing to become a processing mechanism.

Some surprises from the session:

- Many began believing that they had no distinguishing cultural practices, but discovered through discussion that something like eating pork and sauerkraut for New Years is a cultural practice, not a universal behavior.
- “Quiteness” can shut us down—making people seem unapproachable, yet we tend to appreciate the recognition of being looked at.
- Moving past the physical can help us to discover the person inside.

Some of the ideas of “Comfort” that came

- up in conversation among the participants:
- Conversation broke down the discomfort of physical barriers—allowing for recognition of similarities and common ground.
  - Conversation alleviates the anxiety of the unknown. Not being able to speak created a certain anxiety.
  - Finding a connection created a willingness to share and an avenue to pursue additional information.
  - The concern, even after conversation began, of using stereotypes shapes not only the way we see someone else, but the lens through which we assume the other person is seeing us. This affects the responses we give and the reaction we have.

Some participants expressed a feeling of discomfort over stereotyping others, but Antonette and Stanovick explained that the exercise allows for the slowing down of the instantaneous classifications we make daily. Once we and our students are aware of this stereotyping it is imperative that we assess how we are using those assumptions. It is through this examination that we can start to understand ourselves and each other. Further, there was recognition by the participants that the crowd was stacked, to a certain extent, because we knew we were all teachers. Despite any physical differences, we knew that there was a common bond that united us all and therefore conversation was easier. Because all of the participants attended the session willingly, the underlying question was ‘will this work for students who did not volunteer their time to explore diversity?’ How will this work in your class, with your kids,



**Knee to Knee Strategy**

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## NPWP Honors its Teacher Leaders

The Spring Conference was also a day to honor NPWP Teacher Leaders. Four NPWP TCs received recognition and awards for their work with the project. Kathy Dekmar (SI, 2005) received the "in-service" award for her work teaching writing to her colleagues. Kathy is always willing to design and lead workshops and has had great success. Jean Casamassima (SI, 2007) received an award for innovation, "I do things in my classroom to make kids understand that this class is different...When my students read a book, they don't immediately get another one from the library. They sit down and try to write something themselves." Karen Jackson Petersen (SI, 2005) received an award for leadership. Karen has done the work of writing/editing

the NPWP newsletter and the NPWP's web site. Beth Ward (SI, 2007) received an award for being a risk taker. "I had a class of 10th-grade students who were disrespectful and apathetic." She taught them about writing memoirs. "I opened up to them and shared something about myself. It started something in the class. They opened up, too. In the end, they went from being my devil children to being my love bugs."



Jean Casamassima, Beth Ward, Karen Jackson Petersen and Kathy Dekmar

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through your methodology? Lesliee broke us up by grade level. She asked each group to modify the practice so that it could be used in all classrooms, not just classrooms full of willing teachers.

Some of the ideas that came about:

- K-3** – Teachers can have the students look at family structure, as the idea of ethnicity might be difficult for younger kids to articulate; holidays and the ceremonies they participate in can also be explored.
- 4-6** – Scaffold the experience of the dialogue over the duration of a unit; use literature to open common ground and move from there.
- 7-9** – Teachers can embrace stereotypes of middle school. Students can examine in-school cultures. Pair a student with someone and have them write down what they see, what they think about the person—how they think this person going to act toward them based on how they look, how might they do in school. Have pairs ask each other questions—this can lend itself very well to interviewing strategies.
- 10-12** – The practice can be turned into a research project; students can look at body image and its various interpretations in society.

*Northeastern Pennsylvania*

*Writing Project*

*Director,*

**Lucy Stanovick**

*Co-director,*

**Susanne Rasely**

*Deputy Director,*

**Lesliee Antonette**

Please submit all future special announcements, articles and ideas to Editor, Karen Jackson Petersen at [kjp1npwp@ptd.net](mailto:kjp1npwp@ptd.net)

### What is the NPWP?

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Writing Project (NPWP) at ESU is a branch of the National Writing Project. The NPWP is committed to exploring issues of diversity as they relate to teachers as well as students and the ways in which writing and the teaching of writing can facilitate personal and academic growth for teachers and students.

Each summer, the NPWP hosts a four-week, intensive summer invitational, for teachers interested in exploring ways in which writing, teaching writing, and engaging diversity can facilitate success for ALL teachers and students.

### What is the National Writing Project?

A nationwide professional development program for teachers, begun in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley. The primary goal is to improve student writing achievement by improving the teaching of writing in the nation's schools.

Together, these teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves.

After the institute, writing project teachers, known as Teacher Consultants (TCs), conduct project-sponsored programs in their own schools and in neighboring schools and districts. They attend to two purposes: developing teacher knowledge and leadership in their home communities and putting this knowledge and leadership to work to improve student achievement.

### NPWP Mission Statement

The NPWP is dedicated to exploring the ways in which writing, teaching writing, and engaging diversity can facilitate success for all teachers and students.



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