

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

2009 MBWP Summer Institute

By Kathleen Skomski

To narrow down the MBWP summer 09 institute's offerings to lessons learned, practices and processes observed and discussed, and words written and shared would only skim the surface of the obvious and expected; but the summer institute produced, instilled, and inspired so much more. I think I can speak for all this year's participants when I say that it was the most amazing four weeks of our writing lives.

Who knew that collectively we would have so much to say, write, imagine, experience, and share? Who knew that a simple writing prompt could engage us in ways that produced such variety of expression? Who knew that writing and sharing with a group would, for some of us, be so cathartic? So many times during these four blissful weeks I tapped into words and ideas that hadn't seen the light of day for so very long but, to my surprise, rose eagerly to the surface with the smallest provocation.



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I could write!! I did write!! I wanted and needed to write! Every day. Before class. During lunch. After class. And my classmates expressed the same sentiments when we reconvened: through email, on Facebook, or by Twitter. We were writing machines and could not be stopped. Inspiration hit us hard and we embraced it.

Creative and inspired writing aside, we had the privilege of observing each colleague give insightful presentations, tapping into yet another way of using that which inspired us. A sampling of those presentations included Lisa Hine of Oakland University's Writing and Rhetoric Department demonstrating grading strategies that are far more helpful to students than what many of us typically do when we receive a stack of papers. Reminding us to be facilitators and motivators, to ask questions, and to limit the comments to those that are direct and helpful were just some of the ways Lisa enlightened us and reinforced effective grading practices.

Mary Beth Revesz, an elementary school teacher with the Plymouth-Canton school district, showed us ways of using mentor texts to help young writers craft their stories. Darlene Marshall, a high school English teacher in the Utica School District, inspired us to help students edit their writing through "copy change."

My presentation, and the inquiry project I am working on, involves instructing students on more helpful ways of peer reviewing rough drafts. Although I firmly believe peer review can be beneficial to students with their writing, I have come to realize that there are better, more constructive ways of peer-to-peer response that aid and improve student writing than those I have used in the past. Breaking students of the habit of editing each others' drafts and making general, non-specific comments is a work in progress. Directing them to more substantive, content-based responses through modeling problematic writing and by working as a group on responding is something I am working on this semester and, though I don't expect immediate change, I anticipate there will be steady, more focused improvement with each and every student draft.

As Sir Francis Bacon so astutely wrote, "A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds." Those of us from the summer '09 institute have indeed found a fortune of opportunities; now we must make the most of those discoveries.

Kathy has been teaching freshman composition for over twenty years, starting her career at Macomb Community College where she taught for twelve years. She's now in her ninth year at Oakland University, and she continues to take great pride and pleasure in teaching first year students.

SUMMARY

Created by Lori Ostergaard (ostergaa@oakland.edu) on Tuesday, October 27, 2009
Modified by Lori Ostergaard (ostergaa@oakland.edu) on Saturday, October 31, 2009
Article Start Date: Tuesday, October 27, 2009