Welcome to the UCI Writing Project’s Newsletter

December, 2023

What’s inside

- Feedback from the Winter Conference
- Prestigious Award for Pathway Team
- Spotlight on two of our new fellows
- Creative Corner
- A peek into the classroom of one of our new fellows
- Book reviews and teaching strategies
- Beyond Books: tips and strategies from a teacher-librarian
- Coming events to feed your teacher soul

Need a “Brain Spa?”
Join us at WP II on Jan. 14

Carol Booth Olson and her research team: Tina Matuchniak, Huy Chung, Rachel Stumpf, and George Farkas have received the P. David Pearson Scholarly Influence Award from the Literacy Research Association.
Read more inside.

Read the complete newsletter on our website:
https://writingproject.uci.edu/

WordPlay staff: Liz Harrington, Editor, Carol Mooney, Assistant Editor, Laseanda Wesson, Megan Grint, Elizabeth Taireh, Allison Serceki, Lynne Pantano
Dear UCI WP Community,

We had a wonderful annual December literacy conference last week. The slate of speakers was great! Very engaging! I really enjoyed the talks I went to, including the keynote speeches with Antero Garcia and Tricia Ebarvia, and the breakout sessions with Patrick Harris and Jessica Early. There was definitely a buzz at the conference.

I love to get feedback from teachers, because they aren’t shy about telling us the good and the bad. As I read through the feedback, I find that I agree with most of it.

Although I think the speakers and topic were fantastic, I also left feeling like we need to make sessions more practical for teachers and give them concrete strategies. We can do a better job of connecting social justice, equity, and civics issues with practical instructional activities teachers can use. For those of you in the Pathway Project, I’m thinking about work like that. I also think we need a little bit more focus on Elementary grades next year. A lot of the sessions for those teachers was centered on K-12, instead of specifically on younger students.

All of that said, I feel like we had a really successful day overall. There was great energy, important thinking, and good community building. I’ll take it!

If you have ideas for next year’s conference, I’d love to hear your thoughts. Feel free to email me with ideas, so that we can continue to grow while building on our traditions.

Best,
Michael

email: mhebert1@uci.edu
While it is fresh in our minds, I think it is important to be reflective about what went well and what we might change in the future. It is not too early to start planning for next year, and one place to start is with the feedback from participants. So, I sat down and reviewed the feedback forms everyone filled out. I thought our community might be interested, too, so I here’s a little summary:

We got a total of 73 responses to the survey (67 in-person attendees & 6 virtual attendees).

Session Ratings
We asked people to rate their sessions. The feedback was a bit mixed. On a scale of 1-5, in-person attendee ratings of the sessions ranged from 3.0 to 4.9, with an average of 4.2. Attendees of the virtual sessions rated the online experiences slightly lower, on a range from 3.6 to 4.3, with an average of 3.9.

Positive Comments:
Many positive comments focused on the engagement of the presenters, relatability, and the sense of humor of the presenters. Attendees mentioned wanting to read presenters books. There are too many topics to list them all, but attendees made some specific positive comments about:

- centering the humanity of our students and selves in the classroom and the importance of empathy,
- considering the basic needs of students,
- focusing on new solutions/technologies
- space for reflection
- examples of imagery and power of storytelling
- useful lessons
- gaming narratives that allow students to investigate the world around them
- bringing civic empathy into the classroom

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Winter Literacy Conference
by Michael Hebert

- the importance of self-care and well-being (for teachers)
- practical tools for sentence writing
- turning points, use of mentor texts, and the notion of fixed genres being false
- the focus on unpacking our biases
- understanding how our experiences and stories shape us, and how to unpack that
- inspiring themes
- making grammar approachable

Areas for Growth
Whereas the positive comments were varied, some of the areas of growth mentioned by attendees were more focused. These comments seem to center around three main themes. First, many attendees indicated that some of the session topics were misleading. This also extended to the conference theme. People felt like there was going to be a stronger focus on teaching strategies.

Second (and related), many people indicated that they wished there was a stronger focus on writing and literacy in some of the sessions. Although some sessions had a direct focus on teaching writing, some felt that the topics were too broad and intangible. Some of these attendees felt that they did not leave with enough concrete strategies. No tools for their toolbox, so to speak.

Finally, some of the conference attendees felt that some of the speakers focused on a negative outlook about schools, and didn’t focus enough on the positive things teachers are doing. Rather than feeling inspired, these individuals left feeling a little hopeless.
Carol Booth Olson and her research team: Tina Matuchniak, Huy Chung, Rachel Stumpf, and George Farkas have received the P. David Pearson Scholarly Influence Award from the Literacy Research Association. The award, named for P. David Pearson, the former Dean of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education and renowned literacy researcher, is for an article, chapter or book written at least five years prior to the nomination that has demonstrably and positively influenced/impacted literacy practices and/or policies within district, school and/or classroom settings. The article was “Reducing Achievement Gaps in Academic Writing for Latinos and English Learners in Grades 7-12,” published in the Journal of Educational Psychology in 2017. This study of the Pathway Project intervention in Anaheim Union High School District for 95 teachers in 16 secondary schools yielded significant, positive effects on student writing outcomes with an effect size of .48 in year 1 and .60 in year 2. Latinx students outscored their White peers in the control group and 10th grade English Learners passed the California High School Exit Exam at rates that were 20% higher than the state average.
Carol and her team were very honored to receive this award.
Hi! I am Nina Santala. I spent six years teaching in alternative education before moving to my dream high school! I am now in Capistrano Unified teaching freshman English and Newcomer ELD. I love the goofy freshmen that can’t keep all four legs of their chairs on the floor and my ELD kiddos bring so much joy and enthusiasm to our classroom!

I want my students to be able to engage in deep thinking practices and have processes they can follow to structure their thinking. For my presentation, I introduced a tool that I use with my students when analyzing literature. The “Resources of Language Pyramid” helps students identify how each choice the author makes can lead to big-picture ideas. For example, an author might use negatively connotated words to produce a spooky mood that points to a theme. Using this pyramid, students have been able to deepen their analysis and make direct connections to the text, strengthening their writing.

I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity that the Writing Project has given me to grow as a writer and educator. I am so excited to implement what I have learned this summer and help my students see the value and gift of writing!
Shresta Aiyar

Since graduating from UC Irvine's M.A.T. program in 2021, I've been fortunate to teach dynamic and diverse eleventh grade students at San Juan Hills High School in Capistrano Unified. As I enter my third year of teaching, I can't wait to take what I've learned here at the Writing Project into the classroom.

Opportunities for continued, reflective writing excite me. I love creating a classroom where students feel safe, prepared, and ready to take on the day. For me, I don't see school as a place where students just come and go. Schools serve as centers of growth and community, where students can not only develop as individuals, but also as contributing members of their families, teams, classes, and neighborhoods. By giving students a safe and brave place to become their best selves, we can create a more inclusive, culturally responsive education.
The year was 1989 and I was drinking black coffee from vending machines.
And. Wearing a Writing Project Summer Youth shirt that was so big on me my mom put a red belt around my waist and we agreed to call it a dress. Yes. Many of you know my induction to the Writing Project was when I was an eight year old aspiring poet, songwriter, playwright. But have you read the poem that set in motion the unstoppable path that would lead me directly to you all? Nope. That has been locked away in the vault. Until now, dear teacherwriterfriends.

**The Strawberry**

I’m sorry oh Brittney
For that one summer day
When I stole your biggest strawberry
And ate it away

It was so big, sweet and juicy
I stole it while you were watching
I Love Lucy

I’m not really sorry
I’m delighted to say
If you have anymore
I’ll steal them everyday
My participation in the 2023 Summer Institute was fruitful, as I adopted many practices that I now use in my work as an instructor of first-year composition. However, I did not expect the routine of "Writing into The Day" – the thirty minutes dedicated solely to independent writing at the start of each session – to benefit my teaching the most. Is it not common sense that students should be given time to write in a writing class? When introduced to the activity on the first day of the Summer Institute, I was under the misapprehension that drafting was something done for homework and that class time was primarily for discussion and collaborative learning activities. As the seminar progressed, I found myself looking forward to the peace and calmness that the time offered amid the Institute's busy schedule.

I have incorporated the practice into my classes this semester, and though I have changed the nomenclature (I prefer the more straightforward "Reading and Writing Time"), the key concept is still the same: Students start every class with thirty minutes (or more) to work on assignments. In the unstable landscape of the community college classroom, in which students often struggle to keep up with the deadlines of readings and writing projects, the ritual allows students an opportunity to get situated and caught up with work. Additionally, the time also encourages a habit for regular study that I find many new college students need to foster. More importantly, in our world of acceleration and chaos, "Writing into The Day" can serve as a refuge for our students, as a space in which they are only expected to put words to paper. I am happy to report that the reception from my students has been overwhelmingly positive.
In the last issue of Word Play, I suggested using Mo Willem’s books to introduce the idea of dialogue to young writers, which I have done since I first discovered Willem’s books. However, Patterns of Power, Grades 1-5: Inviting Young Writers into the Conventions of Language by Jeff Anderson and Whitney La Rocca, provided me the perspective on how to do this work using the lens of author’s purpose (why) and author’s craft (how), thereby capitalizing on how authors make these thoughtful decisions. This book also provides a hands-on, appropriate way to teach young writers grammar, sentence structures, and punctuation through mentor texts. It is an outstanding resource for doing this work.

I highly recommend the book for reading and writing teachers of all ages to help students understand the transfer of skills between writing and reading. I used these same concepts and ideas with middle school and graduate level students - ageless and timeless ideas for teachers of all ages and genres to grow readers and writers.

Allison Serceki
Middle School

“Maybe friendships weren’t about being perfect. Maybe they were all about trying your best and learning along the way.”

Sparkle and her sister Nova live in Maryland with their father, a sitcom star for a decade, and their mother, who manages their social media accounts. Sparkle has acted professionally, attends a performing arts school, and plans to participate in the spring production.

Concerned when she’s chosen to understudy for the lead, Amelia, who isn’t pleased that a 6th grader has gotten this perk ‘out of turn’, Sparkle keeps quiet. She’s also struggling with something else that she is keeping from her friends... she is losing her hair. Her doctor diagnoses alopecia in the "active hair loss" phase. Will Sparkle be able to go forward with her acting career? Will her friends still accept her? Will anyone like her anymore?

I had never read a story about a child with alopecia before, so this was a really interesting read. The internal and external conflict is something that I feel all middle schoolers can understand.

I think Wilson’s novel connects to the themes of the challenges of growing up, identity, and self-love and self-acceptance, easily tying into SEL lessons for upper elementary and middle school. Wilson also addresses issues such as bullying, but I think the book really shines (or Sparkles) in its focus on loving yourself. Students could easily move beyond the text to create autobiographical acrostic poems, self portraits, and memoirs about their own journeys to self-acceptance.

Megan Grint
More Than a Book Review

Ideas for Your Reading Classroom

High School

This book may trigger you. And that’s ok. Nic Stone writes a letter in the beginning explaining the triggers and why this book is so important. I could write a review about the letter itself: it’s honest, open, and so relatable. Nic relays the idea that the idea of there being a right (normal) way for a brain to function is annoying. And that is what I think everyone needs to hear to build compassion for one another.

There is a lot going on here: mental health, abuse, neglect, politics, and more. Amidst all of those very real issues is the developing and evolving relationship between two teens: Andy and Shelbi. It does not read like a romance but rather reads like the realistic fiction that it is. These characters see one another at their lows and highs. It is a deep dive into the meta: examining thoughts and feelings and the whys of those thoughts and feelings. Diversity, mental health, and a compelling story line, you might wonder if there is just too much going on. And there is not. This is just a great book that is both light in style but deep in execution.

Writing Idea:
The beginning of the books starts with text message exchanges. After reading a few from the book, have students experiment with this writing convention. Students could continue where the text messages left off, use it as an intro to a story of their own, or use it as an exit ticket or checks for understanding in the middle of a novel they might be reading.

Liz Taireh
Library Resources to Enhance Writing

Live Writing Assistance

Help! I need someone!
Is this how you feel when your students are writing a paper? Especially a research paper?

Well, you are in luck! There are many resources that are available for you to use to help make the writing process a whole lot easier.

First, go to the state resource page. Next, have your students choose which service makes sense to them: live tutoring (grades K-college), writing lab, or ask a question. One thing your students can do is not only submit the prompt, but to also submit a part of the rubric with an area of focus.

Are your kiddos better with videos? There are many you can link into your lessons in Skills Surfer. Click on grade level and decide what kind of writing you want to showcase! Here is the 9th and 10th grade writing page. Pro-tip, look under college for assistance with college admission essays and more.

Liz Taireh
January 9
February 13

Write Across America
In the spirit of the 50th anniversary of the National Writing Project, Write Across America is on a quest to visit all 50 states on its virtual writing marathon.

More information at nwp.org

Saturday Poetry Club: meets weekly on Saturdays at 10:30 a.m. Bring a poem for critique and an open mind
Saturday, January 6, 2024 (Just Like a Writing) Class for Aspiring Writers of Any Level
9:00 a.m. Anaheim Packing House, 440 S Anaheim Blvd, · Anaheim, CA
Guest Speaker: Guest Speaker: Amy Wallen
Topic: “Publishing, Pie, and Perseverance”
Admission: FREE

Thursday, October 26
Argument in Service of Civic Reasoning and Discussion
Webinar with Dr. Carol D. Lee
To register, go to writecenter.org
3:30 - 5:30 p.m. No Charge

Information compiled by Lynne Pantano