Dear WP Fellows,
We are so happy about the launch of this WP newsletter, WordPlay. We look forward to consistent communication to you, our WP Fellows, where events, opportunities, and teacher highlights are centralized in a single platform. The outreach through this newsletter also promises to strengthen and support our community for it offers an opportunity not only to share information with you but also offers chances for your greater participation within our Project and other literacy events. A huge thank you to our editor, Liz Harrington, and her staff for their dedication to this publication!

As we move into the Holiday Season and soon into 2022, I want to express the Project’s appreciation for all you do. The return to brick and mortar for most of you has been incredibly challenging; stress is rampant. The COVID-19 Pandemic has presented quintessential adaptive and transformative challenges, ones which have required you to swiftly design responses with your specific context in mind. You continually are writing the curricular playbook to address the needs of your diverse student populations.

Our appreciation includes your efforts to address students’ social and emotional needs;
- to keep students engaged, despite behavioral problems

Welcome to WordPlay, the newsletter of the UCI Writing Project. I hope that you will enjoy our inaugural issue, and that you may perhaps be inspired to contribute to future issues. Our goals are to provide information that may be useful and informative to our Writing Project community, as well as to maintain that community by providing a space in which we may connect through writing.

In bringing this first issue of the newsletter to fruition, I have had the honor of working with an amazing group of people who have volunteered as newsletter staff. My deepest thanks and appreciation to Carol Mooney, Liz Taireh, Laseanda Wesson, Lynne Pantano, Megan Grint and Allison Serceki. I am also grateful to Catherine D’Aoust, Director of the UCI Writing Project for providing the impetus to get us started.

In this issue you will find information about upcoming events from around the National Writing Project, including our own December 15 UCIWP winter conference. You will also have the opportunity to “meet” our newsletter staff, as well as two of our newest fellows, Rachel Grefe and Chris Carranza. There are book reviews for high, middle, and elementary grades, a heartfelt OpEd from Laseanda Wesson, and a lovely poem by Megan Grint. I hope you will enjoy all of these articles.
stemming from a year of virtual learning;
- to support students and their parents, often dealing with adults who are very stressed;
- to remain flexible, given the challenges of remote learning and the transition to face-to-face teaching. Most of you learned a whole new way to deliver instruction and in the process have continued your commitment to professional growth and your own learning;
- to keep students safe by creating safe and brave spaces that included teaching students to wear masks properly, cleaning desks and student cubicles, and insisting on social distancing, all happening while Covid lingered, a constant threat.

Most importantly, you remained committed to teaching and to the belief, despite the challenges and threats to learning from Covid, that literacy is a way to overcome. You are amazing and we are so proud to have you as part of our WP community.

Sincerely,
Catherine D’Aoust
UCI WP Director

I also hope that you will participate in this community. Please send your comments, suggestions, and submissions. My email is eharring@uci.edu and I would love to hear from you.

With best wishes for a peaceful and restful holiday season

Liz Harrington, Editor

Mark your Calendar
Upcoming events

Saturday, Dec. 11 Creating Animal Characters with author Bridget Greene
9 a.m.-11 a.m. EST

Online workshop registration form at projectwrite.com
Project Write is inviting teachers to write alongside their students and author Bridget Greene. Her workshop Creating Animal Characters will inspire young writers.
in grades 4-12 to show emotions and describe behavior, rather than telling an audience. Project Write is offering this virtual session FREE to teachers to give you a taste of our weekend and week-long summer program. Use code tasteofsummer at registration. Please share the opportunity with students. For more information, visit projectwrite.org.

Tuesday, Dec. 14 The Write Time with Tiffany D. Jackson & Delicia Greene
4 p.m.-5 p.m. PST
Read about the presenters here:
Live video RSVP in the online Write Now Teacher Studio

Wednesday, Dec. 15 2021 Virtual Literacy Conference
The Way Forward: Creating Engaging and Equitable Literacy Practices for K-12 Learners
8:45 a.m.-3:30 p.m. PST
Conference information and registration
The annual UCI Writing Project Annual Literacy Conference for Teachers, Grades K-12 brings together more than 500 educators and administrators from Southern California dedicated to improving students as readers and writers.
Keynote Speakers Cornelius Minor & Troy Hicks

Tuesday, Dec. 21 The Write Time with Laura Purdie Salas & Lisa Lapina Greene
4 p.m.-5 p.m. PST
Live video RSVP in the online Write Now Teacher Studio
Join the National Writing Project’s the Write Time with author Laura Purdie Salas & educator Lisa Lapina.
Learn more and find the full series at "The Write Time" homepage:https://educatorinnovator.org/campaigns/the-write-time/

Sat. Jan. 8 Virtual Author Visit: Jason Reynolds
11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. PST
Webinar RSVP in the online Write Now Teacher Studio
Jason Reynolds will talk about reading, writing, and teaching. RSVP in the Write Now Teacher Studio to receive a zoom link the day before the event.

Thurs., Jan. 20 Cultivating Dialogue and Empathy through Argument Writing with special guest Jenifer Fletcher
4 p.m.-5 p.m. PST
Meeting RSVP in the online Write Now Teacher Studio
Effective argumentation begins with understanding. In this interactive webinar, author and teacher Jennifer Fletcher shares strategies for cultivating dialogue and empathy as essential preconditions for responsible rhetorical action.

Thursday, Feb. 24 Pre-Convention to the California Association of Teachers of English 63rd Annual Statewide Convention
Writing California's Future: Be the Change
9 a.m.-4 p.m.
Long Beach Hilton, 701 West Ocean Boulevard, Long Beach CA 90831
For more information about workshop topics and to register, visit the Pre-Convention web page: CATE Pre-Convention - California Association of Teachers of English

Friday, Feb. 25-Sunday, Feb. 27 California Association of Teachers of English 63rd Annual Statewide Convention
California Dreamin': Reimagining the Future of English Education Together
9 a.m.-4 p.m.
Long Beach Hilton, 701 West Ocean Boulevard, Long Beach CA 90831

Sessions will present methods and strategies that are innovative and responsive to how the pandemic has affected the future of schools and the learning recovery students may need.
For more information about workshops and speakers, visit the CATE web page:
https://www.cateweb.org/convention/cate-2022/

Book Reviews

When I watch Netflix, I am often amazed and overwhelmed by all of the choices available to me. I am so lucky to have all of those choices but I don’t know where to start. Instead of scrolling and numbing out, I look for book recommendations or reviews. The library can be a bit like Netflix. We have so much good stuff, but where do you even start? We are here to help! Here are some popular books and a short description. I’ve included books that are popular and activities you can do with the book before even reading it (a bell ringer, end of class filler). The more students hear about books, the more likely they are to pick one up so try out one of these activities.
Liz Taireh

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds
This book will give you goosebumps. A young man loses his brother to a gang shooting. He finds his brother’s gun and enters into an elevator, determined to fulfill a revenge killing.

Uglies by Scott Westerfeld
Three hundred years after an apocalyptic-sized disaster that reshaped the world, Tally is about to turn 16 and “pretty.” In her isolated, self-sufficient city, the operation to make her pretty will be intensive.

Evelyn Del Rey is Moving Away by Meg Medina, illustrated by Sonia Sanchez.
Translanguaging is one way to consider incorporating multilingualism into our educational spaces. It is
The elevator stops at each floor...and in steps someone from his past who has died due to gun violence. After going 6 floors down, what is he going to do?

Told using free verse poetry, this book is one of the most sought after books, especially for reluctant readers. Realistic fiction and tons of creativity, Jason Reynolds reignites a love of reading for more students than I can count.

Liz Taireh

extreme and, as far as she and everyone else alive is concerned, absolutely worth it. Once she’s pretty, she’ll live across the river in New Pretty Town and party the nights away, loved by all.

It's a shock to her, then, to find that her friend Shay doesn't want to be pretty, and doesn't think she's ugly now. Of course she's ugly; everyone is ugly before the operation. Still, Shay runs away to the mysterious, secretive Smoke, leaving Tally a set of cryptic directions in case she decides to go too. But turning pretty is all Tally wants, so she can be noticed and listened to because beautiful people cannot be ignored.

What makes Uglies great, besides how it looks at cultural values, is Westerfeld’s use of language. Westerfeld creates a narrative voice that caters, I think, directly to middle schoolers. The novel opens with Tally observing that “The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit.” That is not a typical opening for any novel. Yet, Westerfeld moves from that observation seamlessly into the story, keeping the reader engaged in the action while keeping the voice accessible to younger readers.

Megan Grint

the idea that students within educational spaces can use multiple languages interchangeably. In this way, translangauging prevents one language from being privileged over another; instead, it promotes a place where multiple languages are valued and used. (For a more thorough explanation and history of translangauging, refer to this article.) Many picture books incorporate translangauging beautifully. One such book is Evelyn Del Rey is Moving Away, written by Meg Medina and illustrated by Sonia Sanchez. The story is about two best friends who live in urban, high-rise apartments, and one of them is moving away. It is a beautiful tribute to the friendship these two girls developed and the memories they accumulated. The text has many golden lines and can serve as a mentor text with exemplars for capturing ‘small moments’ and figurative language. The text and illustrations received many awards and acknowledgments.

Allison Serceki
Spotlight on the Staff

Liz Harrington:
I retired in 2018, after teaching 7th and 8th grades for 23 years at Jefferson Middle School in San Gabriel. In 2001 I attended the UCIWP Summer Institute, and have been involved in the Project ever since. One of my favorite memories of the Summer Institute is of being in Jeff Elsten’s writing group, when he would bring a blanket each week and we would sit out on the lawn that used to be to the side of the Student Center to share our writing.

Carol Mooney:
I retired from teaching in 2019 after 43 years in the K-12 classroom with forty years in grades 7-12 at OUSD and 25 years at Chapman University (English and Education). I attended the Summer Institute in 1988 and have been active in WP ever since. A special memory is Writing Groups with Pat Clark.

Allison Serceki:
I am currently working in San Diego Unified School District as part of the literacy acceleration team supporting UTK-2nd grade teachers and readers as well as helping develop a writing program alongside our UTK teachers. I hope to do some action research with my teachers soon and teach literacy to preservice teachers at a university in the San Diego area. One of my fondest memories of my 2015 summer with WP was from the writing group. We laughed, cried, and shared, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and stretch each other in unforeseen ways. It was a profound experience as an adult writer and one I will always cherish as a highlight of my time spent in the project that summer.

Megan Grint:
Since graduating from UCI’s M.A.T. program in 2019, I’ve been teaching in the Anaheim Union High School District both virtually and in person. In my three-ish years teaching English, I’ve spent a year in junior high and two now in high school. I love the range of energetic, silly, and wonderful student personalities.

Creative and personal writing excites me, and I think it’s so important that students have the opportunity to write meaningfully about themselves and their experiences. For my inquiry project, I sought to answer the question, “How can I utilize a mentor text and reflection protocols to help students connect meaningful experiences and beliefs to their personal writing?”

I chose the poem “Burning the Old Year” by Naomi Shihab Nye as a mentor text. With coaching from Mark Vermillion, I was able to integrate a reflective piece, Head-Heart-Gut, to guide students through the process of connecting with the mentor text, reflecting on their writing choices, and ultimately self-assessing their own draft. My hope with these revisions is that students are not only expressing their experiences clearly and vividly but also really reflecting on why those moments are significant to who they are.

Chris Carranza:
7th Grade English Language Arts, Jefferson Middle School, San Gabriel, CA.
As a learner, I’ve always been interested in the things that make us who we are and how they shape our understanding of the world around us. It makes sense, then, that I’d look for ways to explore this idea as an educator with my students. My inquiry during the UCIWP Summer Institute took inspiration from Dr. Gholdy Muhammad’s notion that, as
I currently work at Corona del Mar Middle School and have taught 7th and 8th grade English. I am currently working in administration as an intern. I have spent 8 years in education, including becoming an SI fellow in 2018.

My favorite memory of the Summer Institute was simply being surrounded by like-minded educators. It was so fulfilling to be able to work with a group of such passionate people and to learn from them. Joining the Writing Project was one of the best decisions I have made as an educator.

Liz Taireh:
My name is Elizabeth Taireh (AKA Liz 2) and I am the district teacher librarian for Huntington Beach Union High School District. Before that, I was an English teacher who taught at Fountain Valley High School. I went through the writing project in 2008 and my favorite memory is meeting Liz Harrington, affectionately known as Liz 1. We made matching shirts that are as amazing as we are.

Laseanda Wesson:
I teach Jr. High and High School English at Spirit Christian Academy, and administratively I am the Professional Development Coordinator. I also teach Freshman Composition at Cal State Long Beach. I attended the UCIWP Summer Institute in 2015. While attending the Summer Institute I remember that every day felt like Christmas because we were always receiving gifts. Gifts of books, gifts of writing, gifts of reading, and gifts of community. It was the real Christmas in July.

Lynne Pantano:
I have 30+ years of teaching experience at the preschool through college levels. I currently teach ELA in grades 7 and 8 and serve as the Director of Academic Testing and Analysis at St. Junipero Serra Catholic School in Rancho Santa Margarita. I attended the Summer Institute in 2000 and enjoyed every minute of it—particularly meeting my writing group. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue to grow as an educator and a writer by participating in WP programs.
Opinion

Waiting for Normal?
By Laseanda Wesson

“This is our brand new normal.” It was my third Zoom meeting of the day, and one of the speakers repeatedly and almost gleefully kept making this declaration. “I wish he would stop saying that!” I furiously typed a private message to a friend in the chat, adding an angry face emoji. Something about the way he said it and the repetitiveness of the phrase made my skin want to crawl. This will be the year that everything feels a little more normal. I remember encouraging and placating myself with cheery daily affirmations and platitudes. I had made it through last year, surely the worst of it was behind us. Teachers had rallied. We shouldered the burden of our students, our families, and of each other. We survived. But, stepping back into the classroom in September was a stark reminder that this year might be the one that breaks me. Walking through the hallways, making eye contact with colleagues confirmed what I was feeling. There was an uneasiness that felt like a terrible itch that needed to be scratched. The kids are not alright, but neither are the teachers. We are stuck in slow sand, waiting, waiting, waiting for normal. If this were a scene of a movie, normal would be the elusive sun that escapes just past our fingertips and peeks over its shoulder with a smirk. We hang our heads knowing that we almost caught the fleeing light. In the meantime, we are stuck with the abnormal. Every day is a new adventure in teacher land. The truth about normal is that nothing ever changes. Growth happens during tension and uncertainty. It is time to stop dreaming of going back and moving forward to embrace... a brand new normal.

Poem

Seasonal Blues
By Megan Grint

There is a sadness in this house
I can never quite pin down
I get up and turn the light on, but I’m scared of finding out
That it’s somewhere in my body
Not inside the walls
Even if I moved back home
My childhood would still be gone

This isn’t what I look like
Not to everybody else
But if they all could see me now
They’d know how I see myself

That dried up, stubborn houseplant
Is drowning next to my bed
It’d look better in a softer light
But their batteries are dead.

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