

The MWP Student Writers' Workshop

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SWW's first year in Frederick County Public Schools

Melissa Krut and I had an enjoyable experience piloting the first Student Writers' Workshop in Frederick County, MD. The Towson University Maryland Writing Project office has, and continues to be supportive of our Frederick SWW.

Barbara Bass, director of the MWP, has been punctual and informative of everything Melissa and I asked of her: setting up the promotional brochures in the spring; random e-mails regarding organizational issues from January to the present; and even the post SWW publishing of our Frederick anthology.

Melissa and I have been invited to a four day, three night trip to the Nashville National Convention of the Teachers of English (NCTE) this fall! Melissa, myself and other MWP fellows will attend the National Writing Project (NWP) meetings and exchange ideas with colleagues. What a great reward for all our hard work in piloting the 2006 Frederick SWW!

Terry Mobley, director of the SWW, came out to support us on our parent/student orientation night in Frederick in June. This helped calm my nerves as we endeavored upon this new project for Frederick County's adolescent writers. Also, Melissa and I attended the SWW orientation at Towson for their site and ours in June as well. That was very beneficial as we got to talk to Leslie-Goetsch, the assistant director. Leslie passed on two teacher SWW manuals to each of us, which answered a lot of our basic questions as to child and parent logistics of transportation and legalities. In addition, the manuals were a veritable gold mine with their sections devoted to planning (with tons of mini lessons from prior SWWs), anthology compilation, and end-of-workshop celebrations.

Co-teaching the first Frederick SWW with Melissa was rewarding and enjoyable. Melissa, being an experienced high school teacher, and me, a middle school teacher, worked well together with our different child perspectives.



Susan Strasser (TC, '04) and Melissa Krut, Frederick (TC, '04) SWW teaching team

Professionally, we self-evaluated what was working and not working on a daily basis. We made each morning, before the kids arrived, our planning time. We'd run through that day's events and mini-lessons, reflecting and incorporating prior lessons and experiences. Melissa and I are honest and open with each other, and I think that helped make the kids comfortable with us. We would think aloud with each other and be flexible. For instance, we learned quickly to let the kids share their writing at their tables. This informal peer response and sharing helped get these quiet writers to talk more. Melissa and I demonstrated being fair, honest and enthusiastic with each other, so the kids seemed to be that way too.

Another thing I really loved was doing the kids' 'zines, as Melissa called them. She led us to make impressive, professional looking booklets of the kids' writing using Microsoft Publisher. And the kids' creative touches were awesome! Almost every student left the SWW end-of-workshop celebration with a book or 'zine of their writing. We also used this format for the first-ever Frederick SWW anthology, "Writers' Premiere." This loosely utilized the movie premiere idea thematically within the volume, based upon the SWW end-of-workshop celebration.

Personally and professionally, I have learned a lot about myself as a writer and a teacher of writing. Similar to completing the first Frederick STI in 2004, this SWW has inspired me. The MWP philosophy of teaching and

writing, coupled with determination to share the joy with others, is wonderful! Several times while planning SWW mini-lessons, I revisited one of my favorite English teaching theorists, Nancie Atwell. Her revised edition of *In the Middle* affirmed my teaching methods and the student-centered, student-led approach that the SWW espouses. “Wow,” I thought to myself, as I re-read sections and skimmed others in the Atwell text, “here we are at SWW doing the writing workshops and helping make the writing process more authentic and genuine for kids who truly want it.” This was an elative experience, after all the frustrations of teaching regular classes all school year, where only a minority of kids truly seek what I have to offer them as a writer. I also enjoyed seeing mini-lessons in the manual that reinforced story and literary elements that Melissa and I had already discussed using.

Moreover, two mini-lessons helped me learn about myself as a writer and why I write; I think even more so than my young writers attending the lesson! One was a mini-lesson on songs, and how lyrical poetry helped inspire me to write. So, I took two U2 songs I love and discussed how their lyrics and music inspired me to want to write poetry. The kids brought their favorite songs, too, and the five of us played, listened, and enjoyed each of them for their own lyrical poetic beauty and our sheer love of music. Another mini-lesson that really stood out to me was a lesson I did on sensory poetry. This sensory-poem lesson was amazing because it truly removed the subjectivity from my writing. One student writer, Samantha (fictitious name), created what I think was her most imagistic poem yet, even though I’m unsure how impressed she was with it!

Even though so many things went well with our first SWW in Frederick—mini-lessons, co-teaching, the ‘zine, among many others—improvements are still needed.

Neither Melissa nor I could impress upon this amazing group of middle and high school writers the need to edit and revise—and take it seriously. Had these writers always received A’s on their school work and didn’t think they had to change their writing? What greater gift can I give them as a teacher of writing and as a writer myself, than demonstrating and incorporating editing and revision?

Here are two examples with two student writers: one who wasn’t receptive to revision and editing and one who



Frederick SWW students and parents

was. To me, they embody some of what Melissa and I were up against. First, Jennifer had a developed short story, which she read to us at Author’s Chair the first week. At the whole-group peer response during the last week, and even final submissions for the group anthology, the story was exactly the same! That was frustrating as a teacher. Her SWW peers and I offered her suggestions for dialogue and paragraph breaks. The fact that she didn’t even tinker with the story in a mild editorial mode, or revise the content was very dissatisfying! Conversely, we had another writer, Lilly, who was very open to revision and editing. Like Jennifer, Lilly carried a crafted short story through the first Author’s Chair, whole group response, and group anthology. However, she made some small editing and revision changes that made sense given character actions. And it was better!

Another area I could improve upon was balancing the content of SWW with its mood and enthusiasm. Our kids were very quiet. Initially, they hardly talked to each other. So I felt the need to get them moving around and switching tables. I motivated them to see their tables as not just a group of other kids, but writers with whom they might begin to feel more comfortable. I wanted them to feel safe. I know how personal writing is. Consequently, the idea of whole group peer response didn’t happen until one of our last days! In retrospect, that should’ve been happening every week. I think that could’ve helped defeat some of the possible resistance or just ignorance of our 11–17 year olds attitudes towards revising and editing their writing! And it also would’ve gotten them to “come out of their shells” more. I feel that we did them an injustice in that regard. Maybe they were just an introspective group. If I teach in another SWW, I will have weekly whole-group sharing along with Author’s Chair.

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Another frustrating area was communication: misalignment and awareness of schedules with our Frederick STI and the Towson SWW. Within our own county, Melissa and I had not coordinated a session with Amanda and Anita prior to the beginning of the STI, and once we started, it was too late, and our schedules could not give. We missed the opportunity to do a teacher-student, or even youth-to-adult writers' discussion, which might've been valuable and fun. Also, Melissa and I were trying to coordinate a lesson with Terry Mobley, the SWW director at Towson. Their starting week (July 10) was our final week here in Frederick. Unfortunately, all of us missed the opportunity to have Terry come down and do a mini-lesson.

The first-ever SWW in Frederick was fun and stayed student-centered. We were serious about writing and making time for it. Kids attended mini-lessons on what they wanted and we shaped our schedule upon it. We laughed at our morning pages' zaniness—often silly prompts with monsters or stereotypical scenarios that turned out to be anything but! Impromptu writing conferences for two, five, 10 or 15 minutes with one writer about character ideas or the involvement of story lines were gratifying, uplifting and cathartic. I would've loved to attend SWW as an adolescent! It was glorious to share my love of writing with other writers. I am using my inspiration from co-teaching the SWW to write at least a page a day. And for about a month now, I usually do. After all, writers write, and I am.

News and Notes



Dottie Harden (TC, '86) has retired as principal of Pikesville High School.



Jen Goulston

Words on Wheels

Jen Goulston's (T-C, 02) students have their work on display as part of the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) Words on Wheels exhibit. English students at Baltimore City schools and design students at the Maryland Institute College of Art created the posters that combine original works of poetry with graphic interpretation. The posters are displayed inside local buses and Light Rail cars as part of the Words on Wheels exhibit.

www.mtmaryland.com/about/mtalocaltvprogram/video02.cfm



*Aliyah Antoinette,
Barbara Bass's (TC, '88)
newest granddaughter*