

English Language Learners (ELL) Writing Retreat

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We came from all parts of the country for four days of writing, sharing, revising, and more writing. We gathered at a mountain retreat in Central Washington for the National Writing Project's second ELL Writing Retreat and were given the charge of drafting original pieces or revising previously written ones. All of us were teachers of English language learners (ELL), normally referred to as students of ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) in Maryland.

Getting there was an interesting experience for many of us. In my own case, it took about 14 hours from door to door, trying to find comfortable positions in crowded planes and passing time in busy airports. The final leg of the trip in the air was in a small propeller-driven plane that the strong mountain winds easily manhandled as we headed from Seattle to the closest airport to our destination. But by then, I was so tired and relieved that I was almost there that I hardly noticed. After another hour of winding through dark mountain roads, we finally found our way to the Sleeping Lady Mountain Retreat in Leavenworth, Wash. The next day, as I walked out the door of my cottage and experienced the beauty and peace of the mountains that surrounded us, I knew I was in a perfect place for the task I was about to undertake.

Once we started to write, there was little to prevent us from completing our tasks. We were all assigned to writing groups that met regularly for encouragement and advice. In addition to response from our writing group members, we could also get feedback from the two facilitators, Joe Check, director of the Boston Writing Project and Faye Peitzman, director of the UCLA Writing Project. We also benefited from the expert advice of Amy Bauman, one of the editors of the National Writing Project's *Quarterly*. Occasionally we had whole group "check in" sessions to report on how our work was progressing and get additional feedback.

In my writing group were teachers from different corners of the U.S., a program coordinator from Minnesota, an elementary school teacher from Florida, and a middle school teacher from Southern California. We wrote about our students or innovative programs and hoped to add a piece to the new puzzle that many schools in the U.S. today are trying to solve as non-native English speaking gradually fill their classrooms.

We wrote about challenging topics. As teachers of English language learners, we often find ourselves advising colleagues with little training in methods for teaching students who are

learning English as a new language, helping students who must pass high stakes exams in a language they are still struggling to learn, living in communities that seem overwhelmed with those often viewed as "outsiders" now living among them, and guiding parents who have little understanding of the customs, expectations, and language of the schools their children are attending. These topics would help others learn what we were also learning about the complexities of educating some of the nation's newest Americans.

My own writing was about an international student newspaper my English language learners produce in my high school in Silver Spring, Md., and how it has influenced many of its readers and writers. Now in its 18th year, the publication is unique in the United States because it has subscribers in many schools in the U.S. and other countries and because it publishes the writing of English language learners at all grade levels, from kindergarten to college.

On our last day, after we had each read a short segment of our writing, one of the facilitators commented on how our topics were different from the average NWP writing retreat. Even though I didn't know much about other writing retreats, the comment didn't surprise me. We had come to this remote part of the country to write about our profession. We are a special group of people who had much to share about working with English language learners. I looked forward to reading our finished work in the writing retreat anthology.



Joe Bellino



Joe Bellino's writing group