

Reflections from the NWP Annual Conference

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A few weeks ago my freshman class was working on a unit using multicultural proverbs as writing prompts. Each day the kids would interpret and respond to a different proverb that linked to the day's lesson. I'd put up a proverb, such as "I grumbled that I had no shoes until I saw a man with no feet." And "Don't speak unless you can

improve the silence." After day one, I realized that little writing occurred independently until the class was able to voice their opinions, and only then did the pens begin to scratch vigorously. After a few days of this routine, I put up a seemingly benign Japanese proverb stating, "Sometimes even monkeys fall from trees."

Initially the conversation began with a narrow vision, "Well yeah, 'cause monkeys like to play around in trees and falling is just them being silly." But as the students stewed on the thought, "Sure monkeys fall; this proverb says everyone can make mistakes." And another student added, "Well, that's stupid because it almost sets people up to say that it's OK to make mistakes because even monkeys make mistakes." The conversation continued with my students grumbling about mistakes and how they weren't really impressed with the sentiment of the proverb. One normally quiet little guy towards the back piped up, "Well, I think it's a good proverb because falling is important. It gives you a fresh perspective."

"Right, and what perspective is that — your butt in the mud?" a fellow classmate chided.

"Well, yes," the speaker hesitantly agreed, "but it also lets you look at how far you climbed. Falling shows you how far you got."

Another student chimed in, "Oh yeah! I get it. Falling out of that tree helps you appreciate how much work it took to get as high in the tree as you got."

"AND, it makes you respect what it takes to get back up there!" said the original conversation catalyst,



Amanda Portner '04 and Anita Hairston '04

pleased that his classmates were now catching on.

"Ooh, that IS a good proverb," said a girl in awe. And with that they were off, pens working ideas onto the page in a frantic pace.

I felt a lot like my students did after attending my first National Writing Project conference this past fall in Indianapolis. As a brand new, 'baby' T-C from the first STI at the newly blossoming Frederick site, I felt a lot like the monkey in the proverb. Not that I'd fallen, but rather I was in awe of just how far the Writing Project has climbed and how much work it must have taken to get there. I gained some necessary perspective to continue to be a force helping our fledgling, little site in Frederick. It even motivated me to start working as one of the monkeys in charge of the Summer Teacher Institute for the 2005 year.


During the Thursday Site Development workshops at the NWP Conference, my education officially began. The Red River Valley and Santee Wateree Writing Projects shared alternative versions of the Summer Teacher Institute schedule and how adjusting the time structure was sometimes more effective based on the needs of their respective sites. Their approaches were quite different from the STI I had just completed, and provided insight into how necessary it is to examine the needs of your own site. The presenters were well prepared, and knowledgeable. They listened to participants' questions and responded with a mix of kindness and understanding.

The momentum continued as I attended a workshop in the afternoon, "How to Help your Garden Site Grow."

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T-Cs gather for our yearly dinner at the NWP annual meeting.



Mapping and brainstorming about the structure of sites provided multiple visual representations of all of the projects that sites are implementing to help teachers around the country and the world. The information from the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project and the Alabama A&M University Writing Project allowed us to interact and discuss the ways for sites to continue branching out and helping teachers improve their craft using the National Writing Project's philosophy.

At the general assembly meeting, all of the speakers were extraordinary. Richard Sterling, the National Writing Project's Executive Director, addressed the issue of how writing instruction is progressing as technology continues to evolve. Both of the teacher speakers were extraordinary and received thunderous standing ovations. Second year teacher Johna Dowdall spoke the language that we all know so well, the perils of one's

first year of teaching. Her honesty, humor and sincerity touched every member of the crowd. The idea of school atmosphere and environment and the importance of welcome were the highlights of Vanessa Brown's address. All of the information presented at the General Session was moving and pointed specifically to the significance of the Writing Project's efforts.

The rest of the weekend was filled with all of the goodies that the NWP has to offer: social gatherings, networking, bonding with other MWP folks, and culling information from a broad spectrum of faces and talents. This monkey certainly learned a lot and felt privileged to look up into the branches to see just how far the Writing Project has climbed. It's exciting to be involved with an organization that will continue to ascend in order to create writers of tomorrow, in ourselves, our teachers and our students.