

Field Notes - Volume 6, Number 2

West Tennessee Writing Project Spring 1998

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I love teaching

by Tina Harrison

I love my job! I love my job! That's a sentence I seem to be repeating more and more often these days. Just yesterday a new teacher asked me how I deal with those few students who never get their work done. He said he thought I was a person who had a handle on things like that--someone who kept everyone working. I was disappointed that I couldn't offer him a foolproof solution, but I was certainly proud to know that, as a relatively new teacher myself, I was beginning to get such a positive reputation as that.

My bulletin board sums up my latest philosophy: go farther; think deeper; work harder. Students in one class in particular escaped their comfort zones long ago. We are pushing the limits.

What does that have to do with writing? Everything. We explore new ideas and write about them. We practice new computer-based learning and write about it. We read literature and write. We learn. We write about our learning. We write about the connections that exist between the learning and our lives, and how or if it's all relevant to us.

Writing is an integral part of everything we do. It's a springboard, a clarifier, a connector, a conveyor, an end result. We've produced over a hundred pages including journals, reflections, synopses, portfolios, booklets, pamphlets, notes, presentations, interviews, etc. We've even thrown in a few essays to please the state.

What is the West Tennessee Writing Project? For me, it was the bridge over the Great Divide that existed between my intentions and resources. I knew that I wanted to make learning relevant, realistic, and interactive; and I knew one day I would. I just didn't know

HOW. The 1997 summer institute gave me the tools and networks that I had been searching for. I still don't have all the answers, but at least now I am passing the test.

Tina Harrison, a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project, teaches senior English at Obion County Central High School. Earlier this spring she was nominated as high school teacher of the year by Obion County Central High.

Courses in English at Night for Teachers and Their Friends

This fall, UT-Martin English Department will offer two evening courses for either undergraduate or graduate credit on the UT-Martin campus.

In Advanced Composition, English 305/505, taught by Margrethe Ahlschwede, class participants will write on topics of their own choosing and read in works of contemporary non-fiction such as *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His Mother* by James McBride, *Near Breathing: The Memoir of a Difficult Birth* by Kathryn Rhett, and *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, by Deborah Meier. Advanced composition meets once a week, Monday evenings, 5-7:45, beginning August 17.

Fiction Writing, English 310/510 will be taught by Victor Depta, Tuesday evenings, 6-8:50 p.m. beginning August 18.

At either the undergraduate or graduate level, these courses may be used for teacher recertification. At the graduate level, they may be used for the 30 hours above the Masters degree, or as electives in the masters program through the UT Martin School of Education.

For further information about registration, watch for the UT Martin Evening School course descriptions in the mail, or call or write Department of Continuing Education, (901) 587-7080, 109B Gooch Hall, UT-Martin, 38238. For information about content of the courses, call Department of English, UT-Martin, (901) 587-7300.

Once Upon a Time...Connecting Reading with Writing--for teachers in the early grades

Camden Elementary School hosts an all-day workshop for teachers in the early grades, April 25, 1998. The theme: "Once Upon a Time . . . Connecting Reading with Writing." Alana White, author of the young reader's book, *Sacagawea: Westward with Lewis and Clark*, opens the day with general session talking about her own writing and motivating students and teachers to write.

Lunch is followed by two sets of concurrent sessions led by Teacher-Consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project:

Pam Sliger, music teacher in Weakley County, "Music, Writing and Reading with the Itsy Bitsy Spider."

Athalia Donaldson, 2nd grade Martin Primary, "Adjectives, Adjectives, Adjectives!"

Marilyn Etheredge, 4th grade Trenton Elementary, "Journaling to Publication."

Joanne Summers, guidance at Camden Elementary, "I'll Fly Away: Dealing with Grief in

the Classroom through Reading and Writing."

Margrethe Ahlschwede, UT Martin and director of the West Tennessee Writing Project, "Teacher Journals."

Donna Dabbs, first grade Halls Elementary, "I Am Special, Author's Day and Poetry."

Marjorie Sowder, 3rd grade West Carroll Primary, "Shape Books."

Paul Cox, WTWP Teacher Consultant, and Rita Parish, principal, Camden Elementary, are workshop organizers. Advanced registration is requested. Cost is \$8.00 per person.

The workshop, a collaborative program of the West Tennessee Writing Project, runs from 8:30 a.m. until 3:00.

To register, or for further information, call or write Rita Parish or Paula Cox, (901) 584-4918, Camden Elementary, 208 Washington Avenue, Camden, TN 38320.

The workshop has been approved as an optional day of inservice for some West Tennessee school systems. Check with supervisors.

About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is in its sixth year as an affiliate site of the National Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley.

Located in the Department of English at UT-Martin, WTWP is supported by grants from NWP with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional funds from a 1997-98 Title II Eisenhower Professional Development Grant administered by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission support the summer '98 WTWP institute,

The West Tennessee Writing Project seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools. It offers its annual summer writing institute for selected teachers where teachers work to become stronger writers themselves and to become more effective teachers of writing. It works with supervisors of instruction to increase professional development opportunities for teachers by helping to arrange and conduct inservice workshops and writing consultations.

The Director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, assistant professor of English at UT-M. Co-directors are Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Glenda Arant, 7th grade math and language arts teachers, Martin Middle School. Student assistant to WTWP is Beth Halbert, English education major from Lebanon, Tennessee.

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But I Can't Write a Three-Page Story

Pat Johnson

These words echoed through the classroom as my tenth grade history students saw their

assignment on the board: write a three-page short story set during the American War for Independence. I could identify with their feelings. As I began the West Tennessee Writing Project in June, I wasn't too sure I could write anything besides research papers and literary analysis papers. But I discovered the joy of putting my own thoughts and words down on paper just as I hoped my students would discover this joy as they used their history knowledge to write fiction. Due day arrived; and wonder of wonders, every student turned in a story. Having taught these same students the year before, I knew that several were notorious for not doing assignments, especially ones that required something more than a short answer. But my amazement didn't end here. Comments indicated they had actually enjoyed doing the assignments. "I had fun doing this even if my computer messed up and it took me several tries to get it printed." This from a student who was basically haphazard about doing assignments.

I was also pleasantly surprised at the results of my students' writing. Yes, I had some stories that were mainly a list of facts from the Boston Tea Party to the end of the War for Independence. I even had a man who came over on the Mayflower and then fought in the War for Independence. Some of us need to talk about the time concept in historical fiction. But on the other hand, I had a number of good stories which made effective use of dialogue, something I struggle with myself. One student was even able to bring a hint of dialect into his story without overdoing it. Several girls chose to write from the viewpoint of the mother or daughter/sister left behind; most of these chose letters to carry their story along. Another girl used a journal with random dates through the years to tell the story of her character. From several pages, details and descriptions leapt out at me. "The smell of tea mixed with ocean air filled my nose..." "He was a sergeant with a head the size of the Mayflower and a brain the size of an acorn that had been stepped on." This unusual comparison put a clear picture in the mind of the reader of the character.

After reading several myths to my ninth grade students in a study of ancient Greece, I assigned them the task of writing a myth or legend explaining the founding of their city-- Jackson or Humboldt. I got everything from a daughter of the goddess Demeter named Strawberry whose sad fate brought about the city of Humboldt and the Strawberry Festival to a son of Jack founding the city of Jackson. My best myth came from the writer in the class. Her use of detail amazes me every time I read her work. Her myth opens: "It was a dark, dreary night. The leaves were rustling and the wind was blowing long, sharp drizzly rain. You could hear the sounds of the creatures of the night stirring and lurking in the shadows... He heard a voice say as if it was being carried off by the wind, it said to him 'Look to the sun for your guidance and you will be prosperous.'" She continued on to have her character Jack found a city and name it Jackson for his son; Jack also recorded his journey to this new land in a journal called the Jackson Sun. But again the class as a whole responded well to completing the assignment and to sharing with the class what they had written.

Going further, I assigned the ninth grade class another writing assignment. As we studied the Roman Empire and the birth of Jesus, I had them write either a short story or a children's book about the first Christmas. We discussed in class various ways to approach the assignment. But whereas their myths and legends had often shown some thought and insight, many of the Christmas stories were just a retelling of the biblical record of the birth of Jesus--very little imagination. Maybe they are too familiar with the story to be creative. One major exception though was a student who wrote from the perspective of a raven watching the scene from the sky. Her story reflected a good sense of detail and specifics that most lacked, but then I already knew she was interested in writing though she had told me she wrote poetry. I also asked her to rewrite her story using second person. When I questioned her on how she liked second person, her response was, "I'm not sure, but I think I like it better in second person." Changing the perspective of the

story and the material can create a relearning of information.

Among my high school students one interesting aspect of their writing historical fiction has been that for the most part those students who have done the best job at writing creatively are average students, not those who usually score high on the tests. Also, those students who do not work up to the high potential they have tended to do an excellent job in writing in the area of fiction. Their grasp of what they wanted to say and their ability to express themselves well surpassed many of the more academic and serious students. But all the students want to hear the stories, especially their own, read aloud. There is definitely a sense of ownership and pride in what they have produced.

Probably the most fun I have had with writing in history has been with my fifth graders who tend to be less inhibited and less unsure of their ability to write. They have written several times in class. Once they lived in Sumer in the Fertile Crescent and wrote about their life there. In this first writing assignment for these fifth graders, I was impressed with amount of information they had learned and how they transposed it into a personal story. They were able to incorporate religion, clothing, and family life into what they wrote. They also wrote in a geography lesson on reading maps. By using several maps with different information, they wrote stories about living in a certain area near the equator in a small town or village. Just about every boy had some kind of pet snake. But again they had grasped more than I realized of the information we had been discussing. But the best example of their enthusiasm for writing came in class today as they worked on their myths and legends after the study of Greece. As they were working, one boy asked, "Do you think we could get these put in a book?" I smiled and answered, "Who knows; maybe we can." Maybe I should publish a class book of the myths or maybe of a collection of the different stories they write throughout the year. As they packed up their materials for the day getting ready to go home, I told them to put their story in their folder so we could finish writing the next day. One little angelic boy asked if they could take them home to work on. Were they really asking for homework?

Why write historical fiction in history class? As I worked with historical fiction this past summer and fall, I found myself looking for more details of what happened and how people lived and acted. History is people and if I can help my students get into the time period and see the events through the eyes of a character, I hope history will come alive for them and they will really learn the information. It will make sense, not just be a set of ideas and dates and people to memorize and forget. Taking information and being able to use it, not just regurgitate it on a test, is what I want for my students. Historical fiction writing seems to be a way to accomplish this. But working this concept in effectively and making the most of it will take time as I adjust from "traditional" teaching styles. Time is also a factor in covering the material and spending time being creative, but the more I can get my students to handle material in different ways, the more they will probably learn. I know I have learned from these assignments more than my students.

Pat Johnson, a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project, teaches 5th, 9th, and 10th grade European and World History at Trinity Christian Academy in Jackson.

Second Graders CAN Write

Kristi Sayles

"Can we write a story about that?"

I had just finished telling my second grade class all about the first Thanksgiving and how the Puritans must have felt when they FINALLY made it to the New World after a treacherous journey. "Of course, you can!" I smiled. "Matter of fact, I think it would be fun for everyone to write a story about themselves as a Puritan during that time. Or maybe you would like to take the Native American's point of view.... Take your pick. I want you to read a story to us tomorrow about YOU as either a Puritan or an Indian during the first Thanksgiving time period."

Had I planned this assignment? No, but I'm glad I gave it. The kids wrote fantastic, imaginative stories about their lives in the 1600's. This is what I call a "seize the moment" writing opportunity. I believe that writing should go hand-in-hand with reading, so my second graders write often.

"How do you find the time?" one of my colleagues asked. Well, I told her that it's a matter of incorporating writing into the lesson plans, rather than considering it as EXTRA work. For example, I let my class write their own math center materials. I have the students compose math story problems and write them using their own invented spellings on the back of index cards. We then revise the problems together and I write them neatly on the front. This process teaches the kids to compose complete sentences, to use the obvious benefits in mathematics. The students take pride in using THEIR math materials. Most of my students write seasonal problems. For example, yesterday a child wrote: "I aty randear was on a roof and thrty felled off, how many wood be left?" Look at all the skills I can teach by revising this on the board with the class!

I wish I had a nickel for every parent note that I found on the classroom floor, in the hallway, and crammed into a desk last year. I say "last year" because I don't have the problem anymore. This year I have the students copy notes from the board into their journals that are to be signed and returned the next day for a reward. Journal pages are never removed, so the parents and I can communicate freely every day. It is a very effective way to tell which parents are involved and supportive and which are not.

Everybody I know does book reports. My class also does reports on movies, educational videos, and school programs. The other day a policeman visited our room with a drug dog. Afterwards my kids wrote creative stories about their day as police officers and drug dogs! It became obvious that most had seen too many bad movies. This lead to an interesting discussion about fact and fiction.

Although, we do several other writing activities, I especially want to mention my very own routine of "Show and Write." I like it because I invented it. Or at least I think I did. Every Thursday some of the most reluctant writers in my room read what they have written about their favorite toy or possession of admiration. We've had the pleasure of seeing everything from homemade musical objects to gigapets. No essay? Try again next Thursday. I have to be consistent.

Are my kids getting "burnt out" with all this writing? All I know is that I have a blue milk crate for student love notes to me. It's getting quite full of WRITTEN letters!

Kristi Sayles, a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project, teaches second grade at Camden Elementary School.

Empowering -- Writing in Counseling

Joanne W. Summers

When I hear, I forget.
When I see, I remember.
When I do, I understand.

Chinese Proverb

This is my sixth year as an elementary guidance counselor after fourteen years as a fourth and fifth grade classroom teacher at Briarwood School. The first four years were definitely a learning experience! I had three schools - K-3, K-6, and K-12, where I was primarily responsible for K-6. I had three principals, forty-eight classrooms, and approximately a thousand students. Every thirty minutes I either was in a classroom or saw an individual student. As a classroom teacher I had utilized creative writing in my classroom to deal with various issues and themes, and it was a natural progression to incorporate writing with counseling activities. At present I am at Camden Elementary School (K-3) and Holladay School (K-8). I meet with classrooms, individuals, and parents, make referrals to other agencies, and plan activities related to Drug Awareness Week and Career Week.

When I first began counseling, I met one grave second grade student, who was an only child, with strong family ties to a grandfather who had terminal cancer. He had always lived next door and was the main male role model in her life. We began to write about her special memories of her life with him in a blank book with lined pages. The writing evolved into a biography of his life that involved input from the mother and grandmother and continued until well after his death. When he died, I was able to go to the funeral home and visit her at home. Before he died, we had talked about life after this life and compared that to a bulb, which is planted in the earth and blooms in the spring, and after she returned to school, we planted buttercup bulbs in the school garden in memory of him. Today she is an eighth grade student who has made successful accommodations in her life.

When you begin to work with a student, you do not always know the direction it will take or how long the journey will be. Because every child is unique, you try to be open to his or her abilities, interests, and the issue and its intensity as you choose how to work together.

Helping a person to identify the truth or facts of an issue and to move to a better place are basic counseling goals. Putting feelings into words and writing them on paper not only validates the feelings but frees a person for they are no longer inside. Many forms of writing including journals, letters, cards, autobiographies, fiction, songs, poem, plays, lists, memorial projects, memory books, time lines, graffiti, wishes, and cartoons are therapeutic and can be more so when enhanced with art work. Writing can be used successfully with an individual, a small group, or a class and adapted to any age group. JOURNALS Daily homework may include writing five positive things of the day, relating one good thing done for another person, reflections on daily reading, and the description of activities of self-improvement.

LETTERS Write letters detailing joy, love, anger, grief, sorrow, or regret to absent parents, deceased loved ones, or significant persons, and then depending upon the objective, mail, save, shred, burn, or bury the letter

BOOKS Write an autobiography, including favorite things, accomplishments, and important relationships to enhance self-esteem. Write a biography of the deceased person when dealing with grief issues. Family members become involved in the healing process as information is needed about the past. Write books about the future involving goal setting and visualizing the outcome. In dealing with a traumatic event use a diary format

to detail the events.

MEMORIALS List the characteristics or contributions of the deceased loved one, divorced parent, absent friend, or former school and embellish it with art work.

TIME LINES Develop a time line beginning with Birth to Now to discover significant events, people, and choices, which can be useful in dealing with many counseling issues.

CARDS, SONGS, POEMS, PLAYS Writing cards, songs, poems, or plays works well as an individual, small group, or class work on dealing with grief, goal setting, building self-esteem relationships, regrets, crisis, or other issues.

GRAFFITI Write graffiti and tear up the paper, put it in the garbage, burn it, or finish it when dealing with anger about any issue.

Writing activities can be done by the counselor, individual, or group with handwriting or a word processor. Writing and then binding of the books and finishing of other products seems to work especially well when completed in one session.

Identifying facts and feelings and capturing them on paper are the constructive tools of change and help a person develop a sense of control and satisfaction, which makes writing a healthy way to deal with the issues of life.

In the past month a second grade student from our school died after a brief illness. Quite some time was spent in the classroom itself dealing with the grief. Then each student selected one positive thing that they remembered about their friend, wrote it on plain paper and drew pictures on the page. The pages were covered, bound, and delivered to the parents of the child who died. Later, some students were seen individually. Each one made a memorial by listing memories of their friend and embellishing it with artwork.

At Christmas this year I received the ultimate gift from our school system - a computer and printer! Now we are able to type as the student composes, then print, and bind the writing in a shorter time and have a more attractive product. Placing a small book, which you have just helped to produce, titled All About Me into the author's hands and seeing them glow with pride is a rewarding experience.

Whether you are writing about traumatic issues or are helping to build their self-esteem, writing with children in counseling can be productive. No matter if it is temporary graffiti or a journal kept a lifetime writing can help to accomplish the counseling goals.

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Joanne Summers, a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project, is an Elementary Guidance Counselor at Camden Elementary School and Holladay School. Earlier this spring Joanne was named teacher of the year for her school.

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