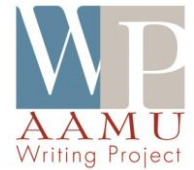


Writing Matters



The Newsletter of the Alabama A&M University Writing Project

Spring 2007

AAMUWP Announces New Co-Director

By **Dwaynia K. Wilkerson**



The Alabama A&M University Writing Project recently named Dr. Louanne Jacobs as the site's new co-director. Dr. Jacobs, who is assistant professor of reading and literacy, also

serves as Director of the Alabama A&M University/University of Alabama in Huntsville Regional Inservice Education Center.

Dr. Jacobs is excited about her new position as she is eager to assist Director Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi in “developing a cadre of teachers who have both a deep understanding of the writing process and the passion and ability to help fellow teachers to become better models of/teachers of writing.” Jacobs believes that the Writing Project’s premises of “teachers teaching teachers” and “writing across the curriculum” are beneficial for teachers and their students. Explains Jacobs, “I believe writing across the curriculum benefits both teachers and students in that it ‘decompartmentalizes’ writing... both students and teachers need to understand that writers use a

variety of writing tools to do the work of a writer – the tools change to fit the job.”

Although teachers participating in the Writing Project come from a wide range of disciplines and grade levels, Jacobs contends that “all writers and writing teachers who are interested in how children/adolescents/adults construct knowledge and then express that knowledge in writing are members of a single community.” An avid reader, Jacobs is looking forward to working with K-12 and university level teachers through the Writing Project’s Summer Institute and various other activities sponsored by the AAMUWP.



Join your colleagues in the nation's capital on March 29–30, for the 2007 NWP Spring Meeting.

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National *Writing* Project News

Americans Want Writing Taught in All Grades and Subjects . . . *And They Want it NOW*

WASHINGTON, DC—More than six in ten Americans (69 percent) believe writing should be taught across all subjects and grade levels and it should happen immediately, according to a survey, “Learning to Write, Writing to Learn: Americans’ Views of Writing in Our Schools,” conducted by Belden, Russonello and Stewart for the National Writing Project. These Americans represent every income and education level, every political and ideological persuasion and ethnic group across every region of the country.

For example:

- 72 percent of Americans (67 percent of whites, 73 percent of African Americans, and 79 percent of Hispanics) strongly agree that “A person needs to be able to write well to advance in almost any career or job today.”
- In another instance, 72 percent of Americans believe that all future teachers should receive training in the teaching of writing and that training should be put into practice now. African Americans and Whites concurred by 71 and 72 percent respectively and Hispanics felt the most strongly at 76 percent.
- Unfortunately, the survey revealed a disturbing fact: only 23 percent of the public agrees that the schools in their community already do a good job of teaching writing (23 percent of Hispanics and African Americans and 24 percent of Whites).

Helping teachers teach writing is a priority for most Americans, and public opinion supports providing additional resources for teachers and offering workshops and additional training for current and future teachers to help them teach writing. This comes as no surprise to the National Writing Project (NWP), which is the nation’s premier effort to improve writing in America.

“For over thirty years, teachers from all over the country have participated enthusiastically in their local

writing project’s institutes and workshops. They have gained confidence and excellent teaching tools and sometimes, to their amazement, a sense of how enjoyable writing can be,” said Richard Sterling, executive director of the National Writing Project. “Teachers will be delighted to know that the public, too, is serious about the value of writing.”

This survey strongly supports three reports issued by the College Board’s National Commission on Writing over the past two years: the first report, *The Neglected ‘R,’* issued in April, 2003, called for a writing revolution; the September 2004 report, *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*, which surveyed 120 major American corporations, concluded that in today’s workplace writing is a “threshold skill” for hiring and promotion among salaried employees; the third report, *Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government*, issued in July of this year, found that despite the high value that state employers put on writing skills, a significant number of their employees do not meet states’ expectations.

“The demand from the public, state governments, and the business community reinforce our determination to place a writing project within the reach of every teacher in America,” concluded Sterling.

A federally funded program, NWP serves over 100,000 teachers a year at 189 university sites in 50 states, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Through its professional development model, NWP builds the leadership, programs, and research needed for teachers to help their students become successful writers and learners.

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Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed.
Ray Bradbury

Horizon High in Decatur to Host the 2007 Summer Institute

Director's Note

For the first time since 1995 when Alabama A&M University Writing Project was founded, the Invitational Summer Institute will be held off-campus. The story whose climax is Ms. Linda McClain's offer for Horizon High – the school for which she is principal – to host the 2007 Summer Institute, is worth sharing.

The story has its background in the 2006 Annual Report which I submitted to the National Writing Project headquarters early in January this year. An annual report not only assesses our work during the year past (our year's cycle runs from September to August), it also looks ahead, visioning and planning for the year underway.

Fortunately when I started writing the report, a group of dedicated teacher-leaders – Lela Carbin, Cheryl Carpenter, Symmetris Gohanna, Leilani Kesner, Amanda Lowe, Dawn Miranda-Fraser, Dwaynia Wilkerson, and me – had had a day-long visioning and planning meeting on December 2, 2006. Although the Summer Institute (with which we think we have ample experience) was discussed only briefly to form its leadership team, the idea of its being held off-campus was not entertained until a couple of days later, when I was writing the annual report.

As I was writing the introductory part of the report, the concern that we do not have teacher consultants in many of the school districts in our service area weighed heavily on my mind. You see, our site serves a large area, more than 60 miles in radius, which comprises eight counties: Madison, DeKalb, Cullman, Jackson, Lauderdale, Limestone, Marshall, and Morgan. Without counting

private schools, the area has about 256 schools, 126,761 students, and 8,317 teachers. Yet, despite eleven years of our site's existence, we have made practically no impact on teachers in school districts that are not in Huntsville's vicinity. Not that we had not recruited from these school districts before; most of the principals in these school districts had received copies of our newsletter with an advertisement for the summer institute. However, we were lucky if we had one applicant from these distant schools, and the reason was clear: distance. Then I thought: What if we have our summer institute in one of those distant school districts, beginning with Decatur City schools?

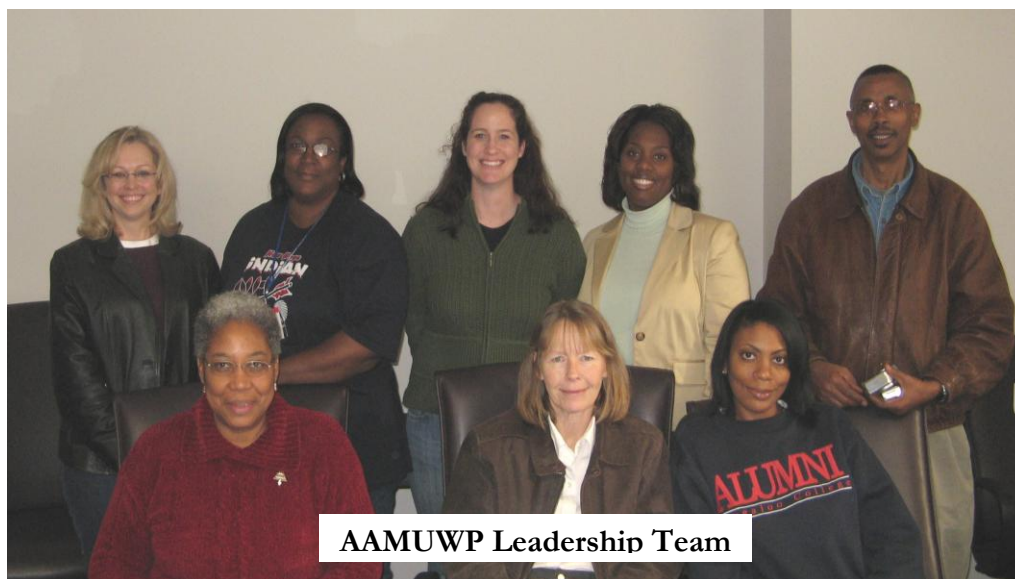
The choice of Decatur for our 2007 Summer Institute sort of imposed itself on me for one reason: Cheryl Carpenter, who attended the 2006 Summer Institute, lives in Decatur. At the December visioning and planning meeting, Cheryl had volunteered to be part of the summer institute leadership team. Not surprisingly, she was excited when I suggested that we look into ways of having the summer institute in Decatur. For one, she would not have to commute again. Wendy Neff, the 2007 Summer Institute coordinator; and Amanda Lowe, our technology liaison, received well the suggestion to have the Institute in Decatur, although they and I would have to commute.

I know I am taking too long to tell the story I promised – the story of how Ms. McClain's offer for her school to host the 2007 Summer Institute came to

be – but I thought I should give you its context first. Here is the story.

Not one to comfortably don a suit when I am not going to church, I put on one (without a tie though) when I

went to see Ms. Jeanne Payne, supervisor of curriculum K-12 and professional development for the Decatur City School District, to tell her about Alabama A&M University Writing Project and our



AAMUWP Leadership Team

wish to work with teachers in her school district, naturally, beginning with the summer institute. Ms. Payne enthusiastically embraced our project, but she needed some time to identify a school that would be willing to host the institute. That is all I needed to hear in order to begin recruiting for the institute.

For two days the following week, Cheryl and I, both in our suits, visited schools in Decatur to talk to principals and assistant principals about Alabama A&M University Writing Project and to give them information about and application forms for the summer institute. Naturally, Horizon High, which is at the entrance of the city, is the first school we visited. After talking to Ms. McClain, the principal, about Alabama A&M University Writing Project and telling her our wish to have the summer institute in Decatur, she offered that we have it at her school. She asked one of her teachers, Ms. Julich, to show us the room she thought would meet our needs – a cozy room with computers and a kitchen not too far from it. Needless to say, Cheryl and I were elated. As if Ms. McClain's offer had not been enough, Ms. Julich, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in Education, told us she would

apply to attend the summer institute, and wondered if we would accept her. Privately, I wondered if we had any choice in the matter.

I wish I could end this story with our visit two days later with Ms. Johnnie Renick, assistant principal at Brookhaven Middle School, but that would be a digression. Indeed, I wish I could retell the story she told us – how attending two NWP summer institutes in Virginia in the 1980's changed her life as a teacher and as a school administrator. But that is another story, which would require another space. This space is for Ms. McClain's offer for Horizon High to host the 2007 Summer Institute.

Two weeks ago, I received phone call from Ms. Payne, the supervisor of curriculum K-12 and professional development for the Decatur City School District for whom I had donned a suit to signify the importance of my meeting with her. She wanted to know how our recruiting for the summer institute was going and what she could do to help. I am not superstitious, but these offers augur well for the 2007 Summer Institute.

Writing Matters is a publication of the Alabama A&M University Writing Project. A grant from the National Writing Project and matching funds from Alabama A&M University provide support for our work with teachers.

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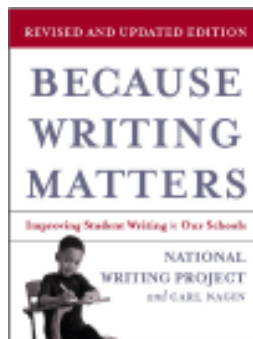
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Book Review



"*Because Writing Matters* has sweeping appeal to teachers, administrators, and parents alike."

- **TIMOTHY LINTNER**

Essays in Education, Fall 2003

Writing is the single most important skill for students' academic and professional success. Yet in the last twenty years, it has received little attention in our nation's schools, and national assessments show that just one in four American students is able to write proficiently. This updated version of *Because Writing Matters*, includes new sections on writing and English language learners and technology, with recommendations based in solid research and practice.

http://www.writingproject.org/pressroom/writing_matters/

Our *Writing* Journal

Good Fences Make Dull Writers

By Becki Savage Owens

I have a dog, a terrier named Jack. Jack is a pretty dense little dog and doesn't seem to learn much, but once he does latch on to a concept, he rarely forgets it. One of the few rules Jack has learned after numerous whacks on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper is that he is not allowed inside the fenced-in area around our pool. We established this rule, which everyone in the family enforces—everyone except my son, Jon, the softy, that is—for a good reason. We maintain this barrier to keep Jack from accidentally falling into the swimming pool and drowning before he can find his way out of the deep water. Over time, Jack has become so fully programmed not to enter this area that he won't go inside the fence even when the gate is left open. I've seen him countless times stand at the door of the open gate and stare into the forbidden zone. A few times, I have tried to get Jack to follow me inside the fence to keep him away from repairmen or gardeners, but no coaxing on my part will get him to cross the line into no-dogs land. He just stands there as if an invisible barrier still exists. And even when I've carried him through the gate, he has scurried back to his proper place as soon as I put him down.

Fences are funny things. I am amazed sometimes at the self-imposed boundaries we build and how often we refuse to cross those non-existent lines. I see this phenomenon every year in my literature class. I cannot count the number of times some tenth-grader, eager to make that prized passing score on the writing assessment test, has raised a harried hand to ask, or perhaps to confirm, if an essay should have exactly five paragraphs, or if a paragraph needs precisely four sentences, or even if a sentence should consist of no fewer than three words. And I half expect someone to ask me whether a word should have at least two syllables. I hear those questions, and I wonder how some

notions become so ingrained in the minds of young writers. Have they been whacked by the proverbial red-riddled paper so often that they have learned to conform—to exist within the artificial barriers of a concise format for writing?

I've shared my concerns with fellow teachers who contend that teaching writing by a formula, such as the five-paragraph essay, supersedes encouraging creativity. These well-meaning educators have found that giving students free rein in their writing often results in vague, rambling scrawlings that make no ultimate point. Formulas, they proclaim, keep students focused and prevent them from getting in over their heads. They save early writers from drowning in their own words before they can draw clear conclusions. Conventions, they maintain, are important in writing instruction if students are ever to learn to communicate effectively and efficiently, much less safely score a three or more on the Direct Assessment of Writing.

And perhaps this attention to form is

I imagine Robert Frost's character from across the wall whispering to writing teachers, "Good fences make good neighbors."

important, since it does, in fact, produce coherent papers, but the conflict I have with teaching writing "to the test" comes in the types of students who *cannot* stray from the confines of

conventional essays. Sure, these kids can follow a format, but they have trouble adjusting when the formula doesn't fit. And forget about writing poetry. Many of these would-be writers can't get past the *essay* fences that they have been trained to stand behind, even when I've held the gate open and tried to assure my students that other options beyond the formula exist. I've seen the contortion on a flustered face when a girl simply cannot conceive of a thesis that doesn't list the three main points she wants to address. And heaven forbid there not *be* three points. Sometimes it seems all too much for struggling students to venture out beyond the bounds that have been so carefully set by my concerned predecessors in the name of saving the young ones from waters too deep. Never begin a sentence with "because" or "and." And for

goodness' sake, don't refer to yourself! I find these standards to be useful rules of thumb, but they certainly aren't written in stone. Many an exceptional writer has successfully broken *all* the rules and still crafted enviable works. Yet somehow, students have become uncomfortable using the very language that should be the most natural—their *own voices*. They have forgotten, or worse yet, never experienced the freedom that writing can offer.

I imagine Robert Frost's pine farmer from across the wall whispering to writing teachers, "Good fences make good neighbors." And those teachers build walls around their students' minds translating those whispers into, "Good formulas make good essays." But something there is in *me* that doesn't love a standard five-paragraph essay—something that makes me wish for elves to come and help me pull down the walls—or show me which walls to topple, which stones to move to leave enough structure to make the grade and still let a ray of creativity shine through. This is my endless struggle. I wonder just how much "the test" really matters. Is it more important than giving students the courage to leave the shallow water and dive into their inner depths and find what lies beyond the safety line? Will scoring a three engender a love for words? Or does so much concern for conventions stifle a potential Poe or a fledgling Frost?

I looked out my window the other day and noticed my dog. He was sitting with my son, Jon, beside the pool—inside the fence. For a moment I mused on why Jack would suddenly risk crossing his invisible line, and it occurred to me that Jon had never whacked him with a paper. Jack felt safe to drift onto forbidden land if Jon were with him. He felt safe to explore unfamiliar territory. He felt safe because Jon was his guide and protector. I took all this in, and I realized that I want to be like Jon. I want to make that no-writers' land available to my students. I want them to follow me into places unknown and not be afraid.

And yet, I am compelled by my own fences to limit us all. I must maintain a certain affinity to form lest I be whacked by low assessment scores and labeled incompetent. I ponder ways to break the chain-link and make the state understand that real writing ability simply cannot be assessed with fifty minutes and a meaningless prompt. I wonder if anyone outside the classroom cares that my students who make the highest scores do so by never venturing into deep waters; instead, they wade

in the shallows as they deliberately dodge complex sentences and avoid difficult words. So, to save myself, I teach the forms. But to live with myself, I also push on the gate with models of writing from other worlds where formats and formulas are eschewed. And I offer hopefully thought-provoking, reflective assignments that encourage my students to wander on divergent paths. And I try with all my might to help them find the road less traveled. I hope that makes some of the difference.

AAMU Writing Project Calendar of Events

Saturday Seminars

The first Saturday of each month

Contact: Lela Carbin

Email: lcabin@yahoo.com

*Advanced Institute I: Youth Writing Camp May 2007

Contact: Symmetris Gohanna

Email: sgohanna@bellsouth.net

*Advanced Institute II: Technology Institute May 2007

Contact: Amanda Lowe

Email: allowe@knology.net

ELL Summer Institute June 2007

Contact: Dawn Miranda Fraser

Email: dawn.fraser@aamu.edu

Summer Invitational Institute June 4-29, 2007

Contact: Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi

Email: gatsinzi@yahoo.com

Youth Writing Camps Summer 2007

Check out our website for more details.

*Writing Retreat August 2007

Contact: Dwaynia Wilkerson

Email: dwaynia.wilkerson@aamu.edu

AAMU *Writing Project* on the Move

Lela Launches Saturday Seminars

By Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi

Lela Carbin and Trace Lawrence met at the 2003 Summer Institute, and in a few days, they developed a professional relationship that was based on mutual admiration. Lela, a teacher of long experience, admired Trace's craving for tested and successful practices in the teaching of writing. On the other hand, Trace, with only one year of teaching experience, admired Lela's competence and confidence in writing and in teaching writing. In no time, Lela became Trace's mentor, and the mentorship did not end when the summer institute ended: they continued to share their classroom experiences and their students' writing samples.

Recently at Lela's launching of Saturday Seminars, I could not help wondering if Trace had in mind Lela's mentorship when she wrote, "I have found it helpful to network with other writers and teachers of writing for both my personal writings and my students'. I often look to the guidance of others, and I have begun to encourage my students to do the same with peers from their own class as well as from classes at other schools."

When Lela launched Saturday Seminars on February 3, 2007, she may also have had in mind the 2003 Summer Institute, when her professional relationship with Trace began. Unlike summer institutes, Lela she may have thought, Saturday Seminars would have no end in sight, and they would bring together teacher consultants from other summer institutes. Lela may even have had in mind her

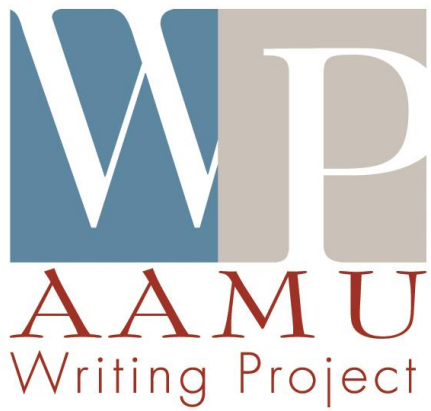
tudy/writing group at New Hope Elementary, where she and her fellow teacher consultants, under the leadership of Carolyn Creighton (their assistant principal), have been meeting once a month to discuss Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power*, to write, and to share. Unlike her study/writing group at New Hope, she may have thought, Saturday Seminars would bring together teacher consultants from other schools.

She was right. At our last meeting, there was Carolyn Creighton from the 1997 Summer Institute, and there were Elizabeth Woodruff and Cheryl Carpenter from the 2006 Summer Institute, with the rest of us from the summer institutes in between. Then there was Maria Bryant, who teaches first grade; and there was Louanne Jacobs, who supervises doctoral dissertations in Language Arts. Yet, despite our group's diversity, our community sense was quite evident as we discussed Regie Routman's *Writing Essentials: Raising Expectations and Results While Simplifying Teaching*, for "raising expectations and results while simplifying teaching" writing is our common purpose.

Indeed, for Lela and for the rest of us, professional development and professional relationships that are begun during the Summer Institute should not end when it is over; that is the *raison d'être* of continuity programs such as Saturday Seminars.

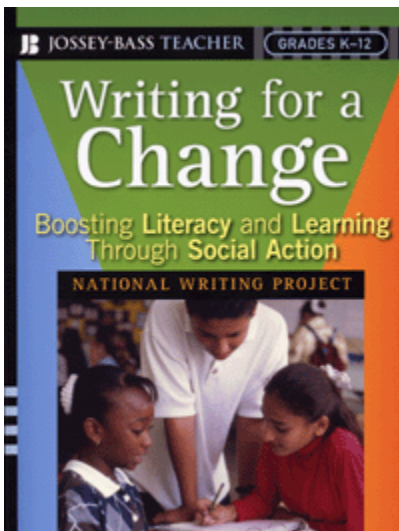
Saturday Seminars are held at 10:00 a.m. on the first Saturday of each month. We meet in the faculty lounge on the third floor of the Drake Learning and Resources Center (main library), on the campus of Alabama A&M University.





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Book Review



Writing for a Change: Boosting Literacy and Learning Through Social Action

Edited by Kristina Berdan, Ian Boulton, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Jennie Fleming, Laurie Gardner, Iana Rogers, and Asali Solomon

Writing for a Change shows teachers how to engage students in "real world" problem-solving activities that can help them to acquire voice, authority, and passion for both reading and writing practice.

Written in collaboration with the [Centre for Social Action](http://www.centreforsocialaction.org/) in England, the book describes the innovative Social Action process for encouraging students to collaborate on problems of their own choosing—to analyze options, develop action plans, discover solutions, and finally to reflect on their work.

<http://www.writingproject.org/Publications/books/writingforchange.csp>