



# Dialogue

A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project

Fall 2007

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## Collaboration as *Spiritual* Practice

By Susan Spiers Minnicks, SDAWP 1997

Collaboration stems from a willingness to go beyond the limits and capacities of self; it requires humility and a desire to explore beyond what is known or possible. When we stay within the (restricted and restricting) limits of our own resources, our own imaginations, our own moral vision, we'll only go as far as our self-devised goals will take us. However, when we collaborate, negotiation and communication necessarily enter the picture. Shifts in perspective occur, new information is sought and added, others bring details and observations, questions and insights we don't ourselves have. Classroom teaching, paradoxically, is notoriously lonely, unless we create collaborative relationships.

A teacher, solo in his or her classroom, works furiously to create connections daily. We establish social and intellectual connections by building community, a safe place to share and develop ideas, take risks, make mistakes and learn and celebrate learning. We build networks with school staff, so practical needs run smoothly. We cultivate positive relationships with parents, learning more about our students and their contexts so we can be informed, fluid and resourceful as teachers—and hopefully coach parents so they can help their children be effective students. With the exception of mandatory meetings with grade levels, departments, professional associations and administrators, some teachers may stop at this point. Not all do though, and their students reap the deep and enduring benefits of extended collaboration. By cultivating collaborative relationships, pushing them with intentionality and focus, powerful insights and transformed learning occur, for the teacher and for our students.

We typically think of 'collaboration' as explicit shared work or tasks, classroom action research or deliberate focused curriculum development, instruction or projects. When we are open to thinking differently, whenever we invite others' thinking to challenge ours, we are adapting a collaborative stance. And whenever we step outside of self, toward something larger or unknown, for purposes of pushing student learning, for connecting students with the world and their place in it, which gives voice to students' enduring learning and teachers' reflective practice, it is spiritual and not just pedagogical. 'Spiritual,' "pertaining to the spirit, of higher moral qualities" (OED). This quality pertains when there is a deeply human, experienced and creative sharing, a synthesis, a connecting, not a mere division of work so as to get the task done. Possible collaborative relationships include:

- Teacher to teacher
- Teacher to teacher to groups or teams of teachers
- Teacher to parent(s)
- Teacher to student
- Teacher to groups of students
- Student to student
- Student to student to groups of students
- Teacher to students to world...

One form of collaboration is through the examination of student work. By systematically examining student writing, in a reflective conversation with other teachers, we notice not only evidence of what we've been teaching, but what next steps we could take with instruction. By inviting others to help us look at student work, we're asking for fresh eyes, for other ways of seeing and thinking, for an objective articulation of what's being taught and demonstrably learned. A further benefit is that by engaging in this practice on a regular basis, we become adept at naming what we see, at confirming what students are doing (or not,) and posing deeper questions about instruction. This pushes our conversation away from Student X and what we know about her, the stories we could tell about her, her family, her circumstances, and helps us develop clarity about what she's doing as a writer. We develop insight toward what's being taught, how it's being learned, what next steps are and/or how we might intervene or mediate. Collegial collaboration in examining student work keeps our focus on the

writing, not the content, anecdotes of efforts, cuteness, or the story behind the text; it forces objectivity and clear, intentional conversations focused on instruction.

Last year I asked our peer coach, who is also a Writing Project Fellow, to observe students describing their independent vocabulary work. This is an evolving classroom practice where students are responsible for (a) choosing 10-15 words which are challenging or unknown to them, (2) composing a piece in any genre, and (c) presenting it to the class on the document camera. After a few weeks of observing them and watching an informal demo, she handed me a little diagram. "Susan, this is the center of your classroom, look!"

She handed me a scrap of paper where she'd written 'word-definition, spelling, grammar/syntax, usage' in the center, and then connected the following with radiating lines:

1. Understanding the process: personal, individual process and topic, genres to publish;
2. Understanding genres: the purpose, context, structure and uses of different genres;
3. Technology: using the Internet for words, images, fonts, graphics and information, becoming adept at computer graphics, and
4. Self-identity and reflection: students seek and develop concerns, construct a social identity and authorial persona through their writing.

It took me a few weeks to understand this as more than just a curricular map of sorts. I knew she was showing me what she'd seen, a gestalt. I had to stop seeing it my way, which had been historical, and see it from her perspective, which came from our shared question: How can the study of words, the vocabulary component of an English classroom, be something more? Once I understood how this practice created a room of purposeful writers, I could then understand how to finesse it further toward an ambition we all dream about: a responsible literary community. The skills and cohesiveness these students developed unintentionally through the vocabulary work we

did was "pushed" in the contexts of peer revision, collaborative projects, book clubs and a level of discussion I never would have thought possible. Building a classroom community where it was safe to give and receive honest feedback is always a goal; now I understood how it could be developed and sustained. It became the culture of the classroom, not an epiphenomenon of a temporary protocol such as Socratic Seminar.

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or mediate.**

"Collaboration in education is the recognition that someone can see what you cannot. Often we are too close to our own work, our own students, and can lose our way without others beside us to point out the sometimes obvious or obscure. It is the most humanizing and rigorous of actions and therefore the most fitting of our profession."

*—Tiffany Shockley-Jackson,  
Peer Coach, Teacher  
SDAWP 2004*

It was through my invitation to respond, "Tell me what you see. Tell me what you think," that my understanding was deepened and empowered; collegial collaboration helped create a spiritually grounded classroom. I began to understand how students were becoming writers through this practice; it was germinating and being nurtured here, not from other aspects of my teaching or the curriculum. This was feeding that.

Collegial examination of student work is a natural step to teacher

## Dialogue

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inquiry. By looking at student writing, conducting observational discussions, suggesting and exploring new instructional strategies becomes the next, natural step. Trial and error as part of our belief system, based on research, observation and collaboration, serves to improve instruction. This doesn't have to be a formalized plan, either. This can arise naturally from observing student work in other classrooms and asking about it. "What were they working on? Did you model first? How many times/ways? How much time did they have for this? Did you take them to the media lab or was it done at home? How did you do it?" These are the casual conversations we have all the time, often with teachers outside our own grade or subject matter area. We don't call it collaboration, but as we notice, encourage and appropriate techniques from other teachers, we're experimenting and learning from

***Just listening to teachers talk about their work, their objectives and their strategies can be inspiring.***

others. It's just happening silently, unofficially, sometimes even passively. By making it an active, aggressive aspect of our teaching practice, it becomes intentional, supportive, powerful. It needs to be acknowledged and sustained; teachers need time to confer with each other.

Reflective inquiry can lead to collaborative work as well. Just listening to teachers talk about their work, the objectives and their strategies, can be inspiring. Sometimes we'll see just one detail, hear just a few words, and we'll "click" with an idea we've been incubating or realize why something we'd tried didn't work as well as we'd liked. Open, safe exploration of an idea; it's as threatening as a walk through a garden with a friend. It's a friendly discourse of teaching we share easily and comfortably with many

other arts: cooking, child rearing, healthcare, why not teaching? The conversations at lunch and in the parking lot filter back to the classroom...if we let them. Professionals in other fields observe and query each other regularly; one would be a fool not to keep abreast of the latest in medicine, law, dentistry, fashion, cooking, painting...it behooves us to be aware of the community we're part of and co-create. Isolation can only breed ignorance, obsolescence and drudgery. Professional ethics require critical self-reflection.

In casual conversation with my colleague, Samuel Cisneros, I mentioned I was frustrated because the girls in one class weren't participating orally as much as I'd like. They really weren't speaking up at all. They seemed to be dominated by the boys, even though the girls outnumbered them. There was no issue of intellectual inequity; it was a gifted class and the girls' writing was reliably superior and I used it frequently as exemplary models. Samuel offered to come observe and help me figure this out. After the first class his feedback was that they all seemed engaged. He asked me if I ever called on specific girls, or just "went with" the hands that were raised spontaneously. I had to admit I didn't use that strategy; I'd really just been hoping they'd be as assertive as the boys and volunteer vigorously. After the next class, where I had students work in matched-gender pairs and then groups of five, we both noticed that gender-mixed groups were less verbal, but all girls were verbal in same-gender pairs.

Samuel pointed out, "It's not that they're not prepared, and it's not that they're not engaged...have you asked them?"

Oh, those "a-duh" moments I so cherish. No, I hadn't asked them. And I'd had multiple opportunities, as most of the girls met me early at my door and hung out there socially before school started. They had no problem talking then. So I asked them.

"We don't talk?" "Really?" "I never noticed...we talk when you call on us, don't we?"

And so I told them what I'd observed, what Mr. C had observed, and why I

wanted them to speak up more frequently. My reassurance that what they had to say was consistently thoughtful and provocative, "your comments and questions are really what keep this class advancing," seemed to be the confidence booster and moral impetus perhaps they'd needed. The girls were shy no more. The observations and questions of the observing colleague, though, were priceless, and helped me establish a new level of response

***They started talking about their talking, and attempted to draw out other girls. Their spirits grew, were strengthened—and so were mine.***

and participation in the classroom. Dynamically, it pushed the boys in the class, who had to slow down a bit, gather their thoughts, and not just dominate because they could. For the rest of the year we brought our A Game each and every morning. I'd stopped hoping and took intentional action, and it paid off for all of us, especially the girls who'd swallowed their voices in this class and in others. They began speaking up in math, in history, in science. They started talking about their talking, and attempted to draw out other girls. Their spirits grew, were strengthened—and so were mine.

Student collaboration in the analysis and discussion of student work generates a meta-narrative that's critical to a learning community. By teaching the vocabulary required to describe academic and rhetorical context and the text structures of various genres or assignments, we ask our students to begin to take a step back. By collaborating with us, initially, we look at mentor text and determine what the author is doing. Here they begin to learn the whys and hows of developing rich talk about writing. In combination with evaluative rubrics, students

learn to talk objectively and critically about the writing (vs. the content of the writing) begin to learn and transfer learning of the meta-skills of writing, and take ownership of their own writing and their developing skills. A classroom that has learned to share and discuss writing, to respectfully and objectively give and receive formative

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suggestions and comments, is priceless. More importantly, students are empowered beyond the classroom. As they learn to be critical readers, of their own and others' writing, they take wider risks, experimenting with words and forms of writing. A collaborative classroom can foster identities as writers and create thoughtful readers as genuine audiences for each other.

One final tale to illustrate student collaboration: When we returned from winter break in January, 2005, students were distraught and anxious about the suffering and crisis following the tsunami in Indonesia. At one student's suggestion, we began to collect money. I used a coffee can. After a week, casually reminding my two sixth-grade classes and my seventh grade class, we had about sixty dollars. A parent sent the message she'd match our first \$100. They did the math and came up with \$40 by that next Monday. Another offer to match followed the next week, and the excitement of being able to do something "big" caught on quickly. Within three weeks they'd raised \$2000, and we realized we'd have to be responsibly thoughtful with this money. This meant more than storing it with the bookkeeper; we had to figure out what to do with it.

Money is money; I decided to take a business approach.

First I asked each student, in all three classes, to research the non-profits they thought were appropriate. We discussed the names that kept coming up, and the media was doing something similar, giving consumers warnings about fraudulent charities. One student showed us websites to check their administrative/program ratios, and I set them to task: write a proposal for how you think we ought to spend the money. They had a serious weekend to develop their proposals. The next week I set up the tables for groups of six, so each proposal was heard and evaluated by a committee of five. They created a matrix to evaluate the proposals, and we began to winnow the agencies down to a shorter list. "Let's just vote!" They cried in exasperation. But how would that work, we have three classes, two grades, maybe we could come to a consensus?" (This itself is a collaborative procedure I'd learned from Carol Schrammel, here at SDAWP!)

And we did. Using charts to record our ideas and rationale, informing each class what the other classes' thinking was, we pushed against tears and loyalties, struggled with emotions and rationale, and came up with a three-way allocation, including one fund which would match our contribution 50:50. We sent the checks off and went home exhausted but fulfilled. One student's proposal was adopted by our district as a benchmark for the persuasive writing requirement. I hadn't explicitly *taught* persuasive writing, but the exigency was urgent and real, and we *discovered* the rhetorical needs of authentic writing.

If we believe as teachers we have nothing more to learn, and are meeting all our students' needs, we are cynical and closed in spirit. Thoughtful collaboration, such as occurs each summer in NWP Summer Institutes, and what develops in relationships across a multitude of diverse classrooms, is a necessary component in the process of developing the highest quality education—and educators—each student deserves. Amen.



## **PROJECT NOTES**

**The Writing Project would like to remember** Dr. Sid Forman, long time teacher at San Diego City College who passed away this past spring. He was an English teacher who spent his later years sharing his expertise in computer technology and photography. Friend Anne von der Mehden remembers him as a good storyteller, an astute observer and the backbone of the GSDCTE's Lake Arrowhead retreat. We extend our sympathy to his wife, Pauline.

**Congratulations** to Mai Lon Wong Gittelsohn (SDAWP 1985) who was featured as a teacher and writer in the March 1, 2007 issue of the *Carmel Valley News/Del Mar Village Voice*. You can find the article by searching the archives at: <http://www.sdranchcoastnews.com/CMV%20Pages/CMVarchives.html>.

**Kudos** to *Dialogue* editor, Stacey Goldblatt (SDAWP 1999). Delacorte Press has published her first young adult novel, *Stray*. They have also optioned Stacey's next book, which she is currently in the process of revising.

**Good Luck** to Sam Patterson (SDAWP 1998) who has accepted a teaching position at a private Jewish high school in Palo Alto. Sam has served us in many leadership roles, including positions as Young Writer's Camp Coordinator and San Diego Area Writing Project Director.

**Please welcome** Becky Gemmell (SDAWP 2000) to her new role as the San Diego Area Writing Project's Secondary Professional Development Coordinator.

# Quarrels and *GHOSTS*

J. Cost,

SDAWP 2005

“If you think that I’m going to cut my paper up, you’re crazy! Do you know how much time I’ve spent on this? I’m done.” Frank’s desk scraped sharply against the classroom floor as he shot up, marched to my desk, slapped down the first draft of his final research essay, and stormed out into the December morning. I looked sheepishly at the rest of the class—most were round-eyed and quiet. Then they began their cut-and-paste workshop: sounds of snipping and paper sliding on desks filled the room. The revision process had begun. I made a note to myself that I needed to warn students ahead of time what exactly cut-and-paste meant: scissors, cutting ten pages of hard writing and research work into paragraphs to challenge focus, organization, and the myth of the perfect first draft.

I wanted them to forget for a moment the mind-numbing writing tasks proposed in their text book, and be seduced into writing about a transformative experience or person in their lives.

In my role as a writing teacher, not a day goes by that I don’t think about how to demystify writing, and lately, I’ve been thinking about the dichotomies and myths I’ve heard about writing: The process of writing vs. the final product; the individual talent vs. a community’s collective and collaborative voice; the myth of characters knocking on the door of the writer’s head, asking to be let run wild on paper, emerging fully developed and engaging as simply as

the author’s pen flows across the paper. I realize now that these seeming contradictions have to be reconciled, the myths dispelled to teach composition.

I started thinking about these questions after one of my most terrible but important teaching moments.

In bringing together these seeming contradictions, I ask more questions. What is the role of the individual author in a piece of writing? To what degree does one’s community shape the individual voice? What function does the composition classroom community have in shaping this voice? What product emerges from this process? What is my role in facilitating or mediating this classroom process and assessing the final draft? Where is revision in this process?

I started thinking about these questions after one of my most terrible but important teaching moments. Six years ago, I was assigned to teach a basic/developmental business writing class at Southwestern College. These mostly working-class, Latino students came to the class resigned to learn how to write memos, e-mails, business letters and other dead language forms. These were students that didn’t know any joy in language; most believed that they couldn’t write, and in the stratification of language usage and power, they saw themselves at the bottom. They weren’t transferring to a four-year school; they wanted to get into the workplace as quickly as possible.

So I wanted to subvert the troubling assumptions built into the course curriculum and give these students a

chance to find their voices and write about a personal experience that had changed them in some way. I wanted them to forget for a moment the mind-numbing writing tasks proposed in their text book, and be seduced into writing about a transformative experience or person in their lives.

When I collected this first assignment, the one I remember most was written by a soft-spoken, doe-eyed student named Angel. He wrote about growing up in Los Angeles with a single mother who used her child support money to buy drugs. He wrote about joining a gang to find real family, and then about the disillusionment that came when his “brothers” wanted him to do awful things. He wrote with a clear and poetic voice about such a compelling coming-of-age experience—his essay sang. His piece was a song,

He wrote about joining a gang to find real family, and then about the disillusionment that came when his “brothers” wanted him to do awful things.

a blues. But it was written without punctuation as one long paragraph. Had he been in a creative writing class, he would have earned an A, but based on the technical criteria of the assignment, I couldn’t give him a passing grade. I conferenced with him and told him that it was a beautifully written piece, but that it needed conventional punctuation, sentences and paragraphs. I gave him back his essay for revision. I worried then that I wasn’t asking to read his words in his voice, but for a significantly altered version, not really his voice. So I returned to the question of how one teaches writing, and had the pit-of-the-stomach, bad-teacher feeling that I missed an opportunity to really teach Angel the revision part of the writing process—his first draft had begun successfully. I was caught up in encouraging “true expression.” I

began to wonder what true expression was, or what I thought it was. I knew too late that revision was a crucial part of expression.

After thinking about voice and what I've seen come out of having students work with their writing, I realize that part of me had been operating under the assumption that there is one true form, that true expression came from individual talent, not revision, re-seeing and re-thinking one's writing from different angles, styles, emphases. As much as I tell my students all the time that they need to "free themselves from the first draft," that their writing should have stripes where before it had spots (just to see what it looks like as a zebra instead of a leopard), I had been mired down in the muckish myth of true expression. I hadn't facilitated the creative work that goes into revising, but had hoped that this messy process would happen out of the classroom. Old ghosts of former teachers exclaiming talent or stupidity at my first and only drafts of papers still haunted my teaching.

If I believe that  
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painfully—then my  
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must reflect my belief.

No wonder my students resisted revision—I resisted it too. Now I know it's time to roll up my sleeves and plunge into the work of teaching revision; I had talked about it and listed things students could do to revise, but had never truly invited revision to class to sit down and commune through the students. If I believe that good writing can be learned—and I do, having learned this myself, sometimes painfully—then my practice as a composition teacher must reflect my belief.



## Remembering the Little Rock Nine, 50 Years Later

*Fifty years after nine courageous students integrated one of Little Rock, Arkansas's highest-achieving high schools, the issue of school segregation is both remote-seeming and still relevant. High school students today can't fathom the notion of being officially barred from school on the basis of skin color. Yet the Supreme Court ruled as recently as June on a Seattle case regarding segregation and districts continue to grapple with issues of diversity on campuses. In September, the Social Studies Department, Navy Junior ROTC Program and administration at Coronado High School collaborated on an activity meant to commemorate and bring to life the events at Little Rock's Central High School in fall 1957. During Coronado High School's mid-morning nutrition break, a group of redheaded students, under the "protection" of NJROTC cadets, made its way across the school's crowded quad in a metaphoric re-enactment of the roles of students and federal troops in desegregating Central High School. The experience sparked curiosity, questions and discussions throughout the day, and in history classes, students engaged in lessons and presentations on desegregation and the state and federal government's response to the Supreme Court order. In an announcement after the event, CHS Principal Karl Mueller encouraged students to recognize some of the de facto segregation that occurs on campus in groups and cliques. The following poem was written by CHS sophomore Angela Lanphear in response to the experience and the discussion that ensued in teacher Davin Heaphy's World History class.*

### 6 Feet Under

classic  
fantastic  
scars  
too far  
away  
today  
you lay  
6 feet under  
under the covers  
hide your face  
change your race  
colors  
and words  
courageous  
powers to the third  
dirt  
and ground  
when you look  
it's what you've found  
exciting  
entlightening  
speak, spoke  
voted, quoted  
paper and pens  
are you real,  
behind the lens?  
skateboards  
surfboards  
groups chosen  
actions to ride  
too bad  
when your race has lied  
to hide  
beneath your skin  
cliques pick  
who is in  
history, imagery  
neighborhood  
not too good  
issues, tissues  
cry, don't die  
because

you're uncomfortable  
let's wipe those tears  
consolable  
school's pretty cool  
email and free fail  
doesn't take much  
all about us  
to hide your race  
find your place  
sickening face!  
don't speak  
not with words  
are you a boy?  
are you a girl?  
videos movies  
watch the t.v.  
it's all about  
you and me  
try to fly  
say goodbye  
white, black  
brown, red  
you lived your life  
and now you're dead  
think  
drink  
ring the bell  
racism smells  
fake, rake  
sing something  
like that  
when you're flat  
"the home  
of the brave"  
let's be equal!  
no one's a slave  
particularly  
past will last  
speeches, pictures  
hold on tight  
it's moving fast  
prevent drugs

murder, horror  
drive for hours  
go farther  
you're old now  
you know  
what to show  
everyday  
back then  
courage to live  
let live, and give  
push the door  
are you poor?  
are you rich?  
dig your grave  
let's get saved  
from sickness  
from health  
from death  
you left  
your words were sharp  
sing like an angel  
with a harp  
goodbye for now  
I swear, I vow  
we all will:  
pledge allegiance  
to OUR flag  
you pushed life too far  
you took a drag  
and judged  
and criticized  
and tried not  
to show it  
life happens once  
LIVE IT  
live freedom  
and truth  
and words won't lie  
before you die  
say what you believe  
live free now  
and be.

# CISNEROS SHARES HER SECRETS

Rebecca Gemmell  
SDAWP 2001

Dog-eared and held together by cellophane tape, my copy of *The House on Mango Street* shows my love for Sandra Cisneros' first novel and most famous work. When I introduce the book to my students, I hold up my well-worn copy and slowly flip through the pages as I whisper, "This is the best book. It is the one I want to buried with," which always makes their eyes widen and their mouths form little O's.

Although I love *The House on Mango Street*, it is not my favorite story by this award-winning author. The story I find most meaningful is the story she tells about how she found her writer's voice.



Rebecca Gemmell with Sandra Cisneros at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido.

While working on her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Iowa, a world away from her own multi-ethnic neighborhood in Chicago, Cisneros discovered that she was distinctly different from her classmates. She didn't look like them, think like them, or sound like them.

Nor should she. Cisneros embraced her differences and vowed to write the book that no one but she could write. She found her voice and wrote *The House on Mango Street*.

In her essay, "On Writing The House on Mango Street," she explains:

*The voice on Mango Street and all my work was born at one moment, when I realized I was different... When I recognized the places where I departed from my neighbors, my classmates, my family, my town, my brothers, when I discovered what I knew that no one else in that room knew, and then spoke in a voice I used when I was sitting in the kitchen, dressed in my pajamas, talking over a table littered with cups and dishes, when I could give myself permission to speak from that intimate space, then I could talk and sound like myself, not like me trying to sound like someone I wasn't.*

In Iowa, Cisneros learned to value her own life and her own story even though it was different from the *mainstream*. Her anecdote about embracing her uniqueness and finding her writer's voice is a lesson for us all.

It is a lesson she repeated when she spoke on the morning of March 22, 2007 to a group of middle and high school students and teachers at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido as part of the Escondido Reads One Book program sponsored by the city of Escondido.

How can a writer find his or her voice as Cisneros did? She suggested: "List 10 things that make you different, things you've lived, things you'd like to forget." She went on to explain an exercise, which she called "10x10." It goes something like this: If you're a boy, list 10 things that make you different from other boys. If you're a girl, list 10 things that make you different from other girls. List 10 things that make you different from

your family members, from your mom and dad, aunts and uncles, siblings, grandparents, cousins. List 10 things that make you different from people in your school, your church, and your neighborhood. List 10 things that make you different from other people your age, your ethnicity, and so on.

Cisneros, like many writers, talked about the importance of writing what you know, but she stressed writing about the difficult times, what she called "shrapnel," as well as happier events, or "flowers." She said, "Write the thing you can't show. That's your real voice..."

Teachers also need to honor their own stories by writing with their students and sharing their work.

So how can we, as writing teachers, help our students find their voices? Having students complete writing assignments and activities, like the one Cisneros described, is a start. However, it goes beyond that.

Our classrooms need to be safe places where children can tell their stories and relate their unique perspectives. We need to encourage students to, as Cisneros said, "honor the stories your life gives you." Teachers also need to honor their own stories by writing with their students and sharing their work.

And most importantly, we need to teach students to "write from the heart." They need to see writing as a form of expression, not a formula. Because if a child's piece of writing looks like and sounds like everyone else's work, how can it ever truly be theirs? We need to encourage our students to write the book that only they can write, just like Cisneros did.



# SDAWP: A Moment in Time 30th Anniversary Celebration



*On March 3, 2007, SDAWP Fellows from 1977 through 2006 convened to share wonderful food, reflections, and writing time together. The following pieces emerged that day, and underscore the importance of the Writing Project in the lives and careers of so many San Diego Fellows.*

What I'd like to offer up for your consideration is not my moment, but the moment, the moment we've each experienced: the moment your demo is done. All our moments. You've offered up some of your best and then let go: of the nerves, the anxiety, worries of sleeplessness or technology. This experience is meaningful not in itself, but because it offers passage to the mythic, into the dimension of the spiritual.

It is why I return, because to be part of so many spiritual transformations—having the honor to witness what is truly beautiful, noble and humane—is such a rare and ineffable experience.

To those cynical teachers who claim “things never change,” or that some clanking pedagogical pendulum keeps swinging, back and forth throughout the decades, I say: things do change. Children change, the world is changing, our classrooms have changed, and with Athena's blessings, we change.

Writing changes us, and as we learn more about writing and the teaching of writing, the more we discover we're never done. There's nothing repeating. We're playing with fire, and paying fine and close attention to writing, to those who teach it, and to writers.

Just as the Greek Epic Hero, or Joseph Campbell's warrior, embarks, ready for a challenge, hearing *the call*, chucking old tools and techniques, feeling perhaps uncertain, reluctant or lost, each summer new practitioners appear—ready to re-envision, re-examine, re-commit and learn alongside new colleagues. This month-long journey brings knowledge, develops wisdom and requires humility. This is transformational.

Through collaboration, reflective discussions, multiple and extended opportunities for writing, new Fellows emerge. Self-reliant, they harden their wings and *return*. They return resilient, responsible, empowered, insightful, inspired and energized. They go back in the fall, not the same teacher with a binder full of new stuff, but transformed and transformative. Thus their moment endures, a heroic continuous moment of change.

To be part of this process is truly an honor. Thank you.

—Susan Minnicks, SDAWP 1997

My mother died that winter. She had been sick for a year including the entire time I was attending the Institute. There was much on my mind beyond learning how to improve teaching writing in my classroom. The realization of my mother's waning life force intensified everything I did. Even so, she fired me to press on, work hard, and do well. Her greatest hope for me had always been to become a teacher of English. Before she died, I had become the English Department Chair at my school—a knowledge that joyfully completed her. I had much fuel for my fire but the ink for my pen was bittersweet. I was happy with my writing project and have gone on to truly appreciate the people and my experiences of that very special summer. As always, the joy of summer is overcast by the drear of winter. My warmth was shuttered by that ultimate cold, but I had my inspiration. Thank you, Mom, for inspiring me to touch the future as you touched me—to teach.

—Warren Williams  
SDAWP 1984

## 50 Words on 30 Years

It is this work that  
Renews us, this is the  
Work we return to we  
Have answered the call before  
We will answer the call  
Again, we will find ourselves  
Surrounded by teachers. In a  
Room so full of experience  
We always leave this circle  
Smarter than when we arrived.

—Sam Patterson  
SDAWP 1998



## Creation Story

Not everyone remembers the beginning  
in the same way,  
but I remember it this way:

The 25 of us—  
Fresh  
First  
Frisky—  
Standing around waiting for it all to begin.

Frank disappeared out the door,  
Came back ten minutes later  
With wrenches and screwdrivers in hand.

He spoke to Mike,  
Then Sam,  
Then Bob,  
Then me:

"We've got to unscrew the damned chairs.  
Typical school  
Lock-step curriculum  
Lock-step chairs."

It was tough at first.  
Chairs lock-bolted into place don't come apart easily.  
Some of the wrenches didn't fit.

It took a while  
But we finally unbolted them one by one:  
Nuts fell,  
Washers rolled into corners.

By the end of the Summer,  
We,  
The First Fellows, had

Unscrewed  
the Curriculum.

Thanks, Frank.

—Don Mayfield, SDAWP 1977



Associate Directors,  
Karen Wroblewski (1989)  
and Gilbert Mendez (1989)  
stand in front  
of a timeline  
of Fellows  
during the  
30th Anniversary  
Celebration  
held on  
March 3, 2007.



Pictured at the 30th Anniversary Celebration from  
left to right: Jan Hamilton (1997), SDAWP Director  
Kim Douillard (1992) and Lesly Easson (2005).

*I first became involved with SDAWP when Mary Barr encouraged me to apply for the new program that was being initiated at UCSD. I had no idea what it was all about, but being thirsty for knowledge of any kind, I eagerly applied. I also respected Mary Barr as an educational leader in San Diego City Schools, so I knew it had to be beneficial. I walked on Cloud Nine when I learned that I had been accepted as one of the Vanguard 25 from the hundreds of applicants.*

*That summer became a dream. I learned through writing, reading, presentations and dining from our lunch bags and drinking "summer wine" (a drink I never drank or liked before). The opportunity to hobnob with giants such as Cooper, Britton, and Squire, among others, boosted my role as teacher to the height of career importance. I knew I could never leave the profession after that, although early in my career I had plans to move on to the field of psychology.*

*In the classroom, I used the knowledge I gleaned to do ethnographic research. I learned what worked and what did not. I taught students to become writers and thinkers.*

—Louise J. Prewitt  
SDAWP 1977

# ***Making Connections: Building COMMUNITY through Writing***

Kelly Carr,

SDAWP 2006

“I like to cause trouble and I’ll get in your face if you yell at me so just back off,” “...don’t mess with me or get in my face and we’ll be alright...you don’t know my thug life.” These two statements are an example of the “welcome” letters I received from my soon-to-be students. I was replacing a well-liked teacher in the middle of the year at a high school where many of the students had given up on themselves. The teacher I was

facing life every day and I don’t believe my life is more difficult or more important than any of theirs. This was a philosophy that I gained through a personal experience with a teacher that changed my life.

By the time I entered my junior year in high school I had already been labeled as an unreachable student who was destined to end up a dropout, but there was one teacher who saw my future in a very different

encourage them to recognize their strengths and become confident in themselves. In order to create trust and personal relationships I began writing friendly letters with my students. Some of their first letters were very artificial, but when they began to see that I was spending time reading and responding to the things that mattered to them they started to open up.

We began writing letters around the time of the immigration reform protests and many of my students voiced their concerns, fears, and opinions about this time. Other letters included their personal feelings about their relationships with friends and foes, what they found frustrating about school, and feelings of inadequacy or not belonging. I wrote every letter back and addressed everything they wrote about. I quickly realized that I had created a safe forum for students to use their voice. They started taking risks and writing about things they felt passionate toward. I felt like the weights had been lifted. Once I began making connections with my students, motivation and success followed.

## **By the time I entered my junior year in high school I had already been labeled as a student who was destined to end up a dropout...**

replacing was told not to give me any information about the students so I could develop my own understanding of who they were, but he did ask them to write a letter telling me what they think I should know about them.

The tone of the letters made it apparent that they had already developed strong negative feelings towards me without even having met me. On my first day with them I walked into an environment where the students had preconceived ideas of what I would be like. It made me think about how they must have felt when some of their past teachers have had negative feelings about them or showed no interest at all before getting to know who they were as individual people.

I’ll never forget how I felt that first day because I know my students often have the same fear of the unexpected, of failing, and of not being accepted. My goal was to show these students that I am really passionate about touching the lives of people in a way that will promote positive and lifelong change. I wanted to show them that I respect and admire them for

way. Mrs. Paige believed in me and eventually helped me to believe in myself. She welcomed me each day with a smile on her face and in her voice. She spent time getting to know me and helped me set goals while encouraging me to see my strengths and work on my weaknesses. At first my grades were coming up because I worked hard to make her happy, but eventually I

## **At first my grades were coming up because I worked hard to make her happy, but eventually I was getting good grades because it made me happy.**

was getting good grades because it made me happy. She is the reason I graduated from high school, she’s the reason I began to see that my life mattered, and she is the reason I’m teaching today.

One teacher believed in me. Mrs. Paige knew she was helping me to graduate, but she had no idea that she was forming my philosophy on teaching. She showed me the value in connecting with my students in a personal way so I can

We ask our students to make connections with the text, to make connections with images, and to make connections with their thesis, but how much time do we utilize in class to make connections with our students? Making connections is what teaching is all about and it is vital for teachers to take the time necessary to connect with students on a personal level. We need to hope that they have people that inspire, encourage, and believe in them, but we need to realize some

of them don't and we need to recognize that they all need someone who does.

This means authentically caring and establishing an emotionally safe environment by validating our students' diversity, encouraging them to think critically and form opinions, and giving them affirmation that their voice is an essential part of the

**One thing  
we can  
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collective whole. Creating an emotionally safe environment provides freedom to grow, where students feel comfortable taking risks; only then can we expect our high expectations to be reached. They need to know that we're listening and what they have to say is worth our attention.

One thing we can all agree on is the importance of modeling our expectations in the classroom. This goes beyond modeling assignments, but must also include modeling the life skills students will need in their future personal and professional relationships. One of these skills is listening. Someone once said that listening is not the same as waiting to speak. Listening involves more than hearing what a person is saying. It isn't an automatic response to noise, but rather it is a skill that involves higher thinking and processing.

If my teacher had believed all of the negative things I had said about myself because that's what she heard then she would've believed that I was going to become one of the drop-out statistics. She listened to a girl who had begun to believe in the words of others and she knew that what I was saying came from pain, anger, and desperation, so she didn't give up on me. Students need to know we are there to support them and provide comfort; only then will they feel like we are listening and not just

"waiting to speak." Model the expectations and they will exceed them. Teachers who are making connections when someone is watching will impress others, but those who make connections when no one is watching will make an impression that will last a lifetime. Thomas Merton said that "pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real." We need to acknowledge when we make mistakes and allow our students to see that we aren't perfect. The more human we become the more comfortable they become with being who they are without fear of failure or rejection.

We all know about community-building activities and the importance of having a classroom culture. However, I don't believe the activi-

**...we all have  
feelings,  
we all want to  
belong,  
we all want to be  
accepted, and we all  
want to succeed.**

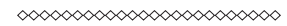
ties create the culture and climate; I truly believe that it is nurturing the human spirit that creates the environment. The only way this can be achieved is by realizing that we are all human; we all have feelings, we all want to belong, we all want to be accepted, and we all want to succeed. These are human qualities that we all share regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, our background, or our vision of the future. These human qualities are what make connecting with our students possible, but making connections with our students make the possibilities endless.

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# MUSE BOX



In her book, *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography*, Edith Wharton wrote, "In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, and happy in small ways."

Barbara Ann Kipfer's book *14,000 Things to Be Happy About* includes everyday joys like "yellow flannel sheets," "Milwaukee milkshakes," "garden gnomes" and "enlightenment unconfined."

Take a moment to celebrate all the simple delights and ordinary treasures that make your life rewarding. Remember too the carefree pleasures of your childhood. Think about how you are "happy in small ways." Create a list of the little things in life that you enjoy and appreciate.

Spend some time on one happiness and explore it; write nostalgically, write appreciatively; write happily; write an ode to "deep-dish pies"!

# Getting Real: Projects that *Transform* the Senior Year

Divona Roy, SDAWP 1996  
Erika Webb, SDAWP 1989  
Poway High School

Four seventeen-year-old high school girls form a corporation, woo corporate and media sponsorship, secure a popular venue and hold a fundraiser that nets sixty thousand dollars for Children's Hospital...Across town a trio of boys sell enough snacks at ball games to house three families in the Sudan...Another young lady tries her teacher wings in a kindergarten classroom... Another young man designs and

ture, where this year 97% of seniors presented projects on June 8th to a panel of teachers, community members, and junior students.

Seniors arrive in the fall expected to devise a year-long endeavor that meets one of three project types: academic major, community contributor, or career/avocation. Students write formal proposals and secure acceptance in their social

over forty hours beyond classroom assignments to complete observations and field work while accomplishing the personal goals they set up in their proposals. Ultimately, dressed in professional attire, they present their efforts and findings in formal, twenty-minute presentations. Finally, before graduation, we ask the students to complete their real-world experience by evaluating and reflecting on the value of this self-designed component of their senior year. We know that they have hit many reading, writing, listening and speaking standards and that they have worked collaboratively with teachers, mentors, partners, and family, but they are the ones who confess the intangible life lessons they glean from the projects.

The project is valuable on a broader educational plane as well. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year, in its Final Report (2001) asserted that "the primary goal of high schools should be

Depending on the topic, the project could engage the psychomotor domain if a senior teaches dance, learns to surf, explores the career of physical therapy, or runs a football camp where middle schoolers practice complex plays.

markets a custom website. One learns a new instrument; another directs a play, and on and on. How is this possible, you ask? How is it that when national reports and high school teachers across the country are bemoaning the fact that seniors are "done" with school (usually by November) but not ready for life beyond high school, twelfth graders all over Poway are learning, planning, growing, working, and contributing? The answer is two words: Senior Project.

Twelve years ago in 1994 four teachers from Poway sensed their students needed more than the traditional curriculum with government, economics, and literature. That year seniors presented a portfolio of reflections on how they reached the benchmarks the school set for them as Learning Results. They presented in the evening to a panel of teachers and brought with them physical evidence of their growth. From that semester showcase a Senior Project has grown to become an integral part of the Poway High school cul-

science classes. In English classes seniors write resumes and cover letters, which will later introduce them to a panel of evaluators as the front pieces of their final portfolio. Probably the most important part of the process is finding a men-

tor. Zack, who built a guitar from scratch, advises juniors to "find a mentor that suits the project well. Try to build a relationship with that mentor to ensure a comfortable working environment" and to "always stay in contact." Mentors offer knowledge and support, foster an adult working relationship, and provide real-world job performance evaluations twice during the year.

Students go on to conduct academic research into essential issues surrounding their topics, and to devote

Finally, before graduation, we ask the students to complete their real-world experience by evaluating and reflecting on the value of this self-designed component of their senior year.

graduating students who are ready (and eager) to learn more, capable of thinking critically, and comfortable with the ambiguities of the problem-solving process." It recognized the futility of more seat time and recommended "a capstone project...internship...research project...community service..." The year-long Senior Project touches many of the domains outlined by Benjamin Bloom and other education gurus. Depending on the topic, the project could engage the psychomotor domain if a senior teach-

es dance, learns to surf, explores the career of physical therapy, or runs a football camp where middle schoolers practice complex plays. When seniors apply MLA format to a paper, practice effective public speaking, or write monthly reflections on their progress, they are analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. The Senior Project engages the affective domain by focusing the students on receiving and respond-

**The aim of this  
culture-changing  
experience is to reform  
the senior year,  
making it "more  
satisfying to students  
and more consistent  
with their interests"**

ing to interpersonal signals, valuing their own opinions and those of their peers through thesis-based writing. Responsibility and values also play a key role in the Senior Project. Derek, who designed a "green" building, preached against procrastination himself when he reflected, "I wish I just would have busted out some of those assignments on time, rather than put them off to the last minute." And Casey who ran a toy drive for Father Joe shines with one of the college readiness skills outlined by David Conley with her epiphany: "At many points I wanted to just throw in the towel and figure out a new project because it seemed like nothing was working quite right, but I stuck with it and am very satisfied with the results."

The shared responsibility of the social science and English departments speaks to its interdisciplinary subject matter, and because students design their own projects, the "stress is on problem solving, not mastering organized subject matter" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). The Senior Project has challenged the idea that standards should be parceled out to separate departments and that students learn enough to become contributing members of the community through gaining the head knowledge that standardized tests can measure. Its content is

beyond the information they have been learning for their academic courses throughout their educational careers. It is open content, as it relates to the learner and his or her concerns. Seniors become active learners who must employ critical thinking in order to propose, analyze, revise, and anticipate as well as be flexible about possible roadblocks on their way through a successful learning experience. It celebrates the ideas that "knowledge is a process in which reality is constantly changing" (Ornstein & Hunkins), and that students need to test out their plans not only against facts, but also against experience in the real world. The aim of this culture-changing experience is to reform the senior year, making it "more satisfying to students and more consistent with their interests" (Ornstein & Hunkins).

Ornstein and Hunkins reminded us that "no two students construct their knowledge in the same ways and thus their resulting knowledge is unique to each." Students value choice, and by designing equitable learning experiences, we addressed the needs and abilities of a diverse population. We stressed integration as we discussed the horizontal relationships of the content among the various courses we teach. We also highlighted the balance among personal, social, and intellectual goals, such as fostering flexibility and perseverance, allowing more stakeholders to take part in the process, and creating opportunities for students to think outside the box.

**At the end of another  
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It would be easy to assert that the Senior Project with its pie-in-the-sky aims of metamorphosing the senior year fits the critical emancipatory model that desires curriculum to free oppressed students. This philosophical stance is at its roots, and

## On Writing a Poem

*Tweezing images from  
a drowsing mind  
I pluck and groom each  
verbal snapshot  
until the words fit  
like cogs and wheel  
to drive the poem  
forward*

*As each metaphor  
climbs  
like*

*a multi-  
colored  
Lego  
tower*

*Syllables to symbols  
Bricks to breath  
Each figurative configuration*

*Cunning confection  
Swirls*

*A vortex of cotton candy  
Memories  
and fears*

*Tending this garden  
embraced by the two  
pebble-pocked journal covers  
I prune and praise  
Encourage and worship  
Each word  
that blossoms up to speak for me  
with a voice  
of color  
and fragrance.*

—Erika Webb  
SDAWP 1989

Paulo Freire would be proud. He reminds us that freedom is not just freedom “from,” but it is “freedom to create and to construct, to wonder and to venture.”

At the end of another school year, hot off the most recent round of Senior Project presentations, we continue to see this liberating curriculum as a work in progress. As such, it requires some fine-tuning, yet already parents, panelists, and staff are calling it the best ever for organization, content, consistency, and execution. In their final reflections, students assessed their own progress, the process and the concept. Their feedback addresses the work, their feelings, and the amount and nature of the support they received. All agree they would not have grown in so many ways without having the Senior Project in their lives; many report to juniors that designing the right project, one they are passionate about, is the key to fulfillment.

In 1936 John Dewey insisted that “education [be] understood as a unified process” (Englund, 2001). The whole child, the whole school, the whole learning community: the Senior Project is Poway High’s foray into rethinking education as a unified experience. We have answered the call made by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, which holds that “National Life and the economy are changing much faster than our schools... the nation faces a deeply troubling future unless we transform the lost opportunity of the senior year into an integral part of the students’ preparation for life, citizenship, work, and further education.” Poway High School has identified the standards and skills that will help our students to be successful and has rolled them into a challenging rite of passage called the Senior Project.

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# Congratulations

## SDAWP Fellows Summer 2007

**Beate Bermann-Enn**

San Diego Mesa College  
SDCCD

**Linda Howse Smith**

Standley Middle School  
San Diego Unified

**Amy Brothers**

Angier Elementary  
San Diego Unified

**Jennifer Kelley**

Taft Middle School  
San Diego Unified

**Norma Campos**

La Mirada Elementary  
San Ysidro

**Kendra Madden**

Morse High School  
San Diego Unified

**Trish d’Entremont**

Ada Harris Elementary  
Cardiff

**Cara Rae Owens**

San Diego State University  
CSU

**Stella Erkam**

King-Chavez Academy  
San Diego Unified

**Rick Roehrich**

Clairemont High School  
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**Lauren Halsted**

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SDCCD

**Lucy Rothlisberger**

Fuerte Elementary  
Cajon Valley Union

**Ted Hernandez**

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**Allen Teng**

Woodland Park Middle School  
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**Iris Hofreiter**

Ditmar Elementary  
Oceanside Unified

**Michael Wagenleitner**

Chapman University  
San Diego

**Jennifer Howard**

Sycamore Ridge Elementary  
Del Mar Union

**Tracey Walker**

San Diego Mesa College  
SDCCD

# PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

## English Journal NCTE

Seeking manuscripts on any aspect of English language arts teaching in secondary schools. Writers may describe new ideas or innovative practices, discuss an issue, or argue for a particular point of view about the teaching of English language arts.

We prefer manuscripts with a conversational tone that place classrooms and classroom practices in the foreground while acknowledging the relationship of relevant theory and research in providing context for action and reflection.

We also seek manuscripts that discuss single works of literature or films that may be taught in a middle school, junior high school, or senior high school class. Such manuscripts should address ways that the particular work could be relevant to the students and English language arts instruction.

In general, manuscripts for articles should be no more than ten to fifteen double-spaced, typed pages in length (approximately 2,500 to 3,750 words). Longer manuscripts are discouraged; shorter ones may be acceptable.

For submission guidelines visit:  
[www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/infoforauthors.htm#articles](http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/infoforauthors.htm#articles)

## Voices from the Middle

At the Crossroads: Decision Making  
for Literacy Development  
Deadline: December 1, 2007

Many journeys require travelers to make major decisions when they approach a crossroad. In our classrooms, we sometimes find ourselves at crossroads in terms of what paths to take to help students move forward in their literacy development.

For example, what curricular,

instructional, and/or assessment crossroads have you and your students faced? Which path did you take? What did you learn along the way?

For submission guidelines visit:  
[www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/vm/write/110485.htm](http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/vm/write/110485.htm)

## Language Arts NCTE

In each issue, we will feature a final page called "In Closing . . ." This is a one-page format (750-word maximum) that could take the form of a poem, essay, conversation, journal entry, short story, or visual art with caption.

The focus is on the voices of educators who have recognized a shift in perspective, perception, or practice—in their school, their district, or themselves.

We hope that readers will look forward to this feature because it prompts them to remember and rethink.

For submission guidelines visit:  
[www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/la/write/109012.htm](http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/la/write/109012.htm)

## Classroom Notes Plus NCTE

*Classroom Notes Plus*, NCTE's quarterly newsletter of practical teaching ideas for the middle and secondary school level, invites descriptions of teaching practices for consideration.

We ask that submissions be original and previously unpublished and, in the case of an adapted idea, that you clearly identify any sources that deserve mention. Please be aware that any student work needs to be accompanied by statements of consent by the student and his or her parents.

For submission guidelines visit:  
[www.ncte.org/pubs/publish/journals/109277.htm](http://www.ncte.org/pubs/publish/journals/109277.htm)

## DIALOGUE

### Call for Manuscripts

Spring 2008 Issue  
Submission Deadline:  
March 6, 2008

### Purposeful Writing

*"Writing daily, or almost daily, no matter what comes out, makes me feel whole, purposeful, balanced, scrubbed clean. There is so much about the process of writing that is mysterious to me, but this one thing I've found to be true: Writing begets writing."*

—Dorianne Laux, poet

With the demands of writing curriculum, sometimes what we ask our students to write isn't necessarily what they'd consider "purposeful" or "fun." The classroom is never without the students who raise their hands in query: "Why do we have to do this?" "What's the point?" How do you embrace and execute the challenge of creating purposeful writing experiences from mandatory writing? What are your hooks and points of entry? In what ways do creative writing assignments beget enthusiasm toward structured writing assignments?

*Dialogue* would like to receive your work or the work of your students. Submit a story of student success, a strategy for implementation, or a personal essay on your teaching experience.

Send all manuscript submissions, suggestions, letters to the editor and Project Notes to:

*Dialogue* UCSD/SDAWP  
9500 Gilman Drive, 0036  
La Jolla, CA 92093 - 0036

Email:  
[moonbeam5@cox.net](mailto:moonbeam5@cox.net)  
[jenny4moore@hotmail.com](mailto:jenny4moore@hotmail.com)

# Calendar of Events

## Process and Product Workshop Series: Grades 6-12

UCSD Cross Cultural Center  
11/28, 1/9, 3/5, 4/2  
5:00 - 8:00 p.m.

## 2008 Summer Institute

Attention Fellows!  
Please consider nominating a colleague.  
Applications are now available.

## Spring Writing Marathon

SAVE THE DATE  
Balboa Park  
May 3, 2008  
9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

## Extended Conversations about Writing: Grades 1-6

San Diego County Office of Education  
12/4, 1/8, 2/19, 4/1  
4:00 - 7:00 p.m.

## Promising Practices Spring Conference

April 19, 2008  
Marina Village Resort  
San Diego, CA  
8:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

*For more information regarding SDAWP programs, visit our website at <http://create.ucsd.edu/sdawp/> or call the SDAWP office at 858-534-2576.*

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### Visit our website at

<http://create.ucsd.edu/sdawp/>

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LA JOLLA, CA