Teaching Labs and Teacher-Leaders  
by Michael Weller

My experience as a member of the California Writing Project (CWP) has been multi-sided, offering me chances to collaborate with teachers, to reexamine and refine my own teaching, and to help my students improve their writing.

I am now a Teacher-Consultant for the Los Angeles Writing Project (LAWP), though I also have benefited from my contacts with a number of other sites. I attended the San Diego Area Writing Project’s Summer Institute in 2006, before I moved back to Los Angeles, and my experience there marked the beginning of my growth as a member of CWP. My work as a Returning Fellow at LAWPs 2008 Summer Institute continued this growth, and my work since then as a Teacher-Consultant for LAWPs has been profoundly influential on my classroom instruction. (If I may change my metaphors, my Teacher-Consultant work has been like a fireworks display for me—the insights I’ve gained into the teaching of writing are so profound and powerful that I can only describe them by invoking images of explosion and light.) LAWPs co-directors, Robert Land and Carolyn Frank, also have roots at UC Irvine and UC Santa Barbara, respectively, and as a result their colleagues from those sites—“distant teachers”—have influenced me, especially the work of Carol Booth Olson.

Young Writers’ Camp: A Teaching Lab

This summer, I taught my first Young Writers Camp (YWC) for LAWPs. I worked with a small group of high school-age kids; we met four days a week for three weeks. In the YWC, I was able to try out new writing strategies, some of which I had learned in LAWPs 2008 Summer Institute but had not yet used with students. Foremost among the best practices that emerged from my experience with these young writers was our use of writing groups and community-building activities.

We formed writing groups on the first Wednesday of camp, and began with a community-building game called “Unique and Similar.” After that initial exercise, groups had about 30 minutes a day to write together; we also played “icebreaker” and community-building games nearly every morning.

In one group, the kids quickly had the idea to write a set of stories together. In the other group, the kids formed different combinations to create a variety of pieces including a rap, a short story, and an autobiographical piece.

The line between Author’s Chair and writing groups gradually blurred and disappeared as the kids talked over their word choice and plot developments as they wrote. During these sessions, I moved back and forth between the groups, listening, making notes, and only occasionally offering suggestions. Allowing the kids leeway, with time to think and pre-write—and resisting my sage-on-the-stage-ish urge to barge in and solve their problems for them—led to some really good writing, especially during the last week of the camp.

Of course, a “teaching lab” like the YWC, with seven students and a three-and-a-half-hour block, is quite removed from the “real world” of September to June, when many teachers cope with classes of thirty-five-plus students, rigid pacing plans, and limited time. For example, what do “patience” and “leeway” look like in a classroom of thirty-six, with a curriculum that includes frequent mandated assessment? My YWC students were highly skilled and motivated, as well; how do I adapt my approach for kids who aren’t as sure about how to use independent writing time, or may not be as motivated to solve the problems they encounter as writers? While I have some ideas, I haven’t answered these questions yet. However, I consider the questions themselves valuable—as Michael Fullan has observed, “problems are our friends…if you do something about them,” since problems, combined with “a spirit of openness and inquiry,” can lead to the learning and insight that is essential to effective teaching. Moreover, the YWC gave me a chance to test out several strategies and reflect on their effectiveness. It’s one thing to learn about a strategy in a presentation, but nothing (for me at least) can replace trying out a strategy with kids. Using strategies like the Read Around in our YWC gave me confidence to try out these approaches with my “regular” classes, and allowed me to see what worked and what I needed to modify.

This September, my confidence and insight from my YWC experience have reinvigorated my writing instruction in my “regular” classroom, Room 249 at Mountain View High, in the Los Angeles suburb of El Monte. In particular, I’ve revamped the way I introduce writing workshop, with the stamp of my CWP experience apparent throughout.

Adapting the advice of Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi, we started with several short read-alouds, excerpts from Michael Jaime-Becerra’s Every Night Is Ladies’ Night. (I chose this book because the stories are set in El Monte; the opening sentences amaze the kids with their description of a boy shooting baskets at Krantz Middle School, which about half of our students attended.) Paired with these read-alouds were several pre-reading activities, including a kind of auto-biographical timeline that I learned during the LAWPs 2008 Summer Institute in a presentation by Dan Kirby and Dawn Latta Kirby. After a couple of weeks of pre-writing and read-aloud, we launched Writing Workshop with a quintessential CWP activity—the use of mentor texts, specifically the “Where I’m From” poem, after George Ella Lyon’s poem of the same name.

Students looked through the pre-writing in their writing portfolios to see if they already had any ideas for writing. After the students had a few minutes of thinking time, I passed out copies of “Where I’m
From,” and played Ms. Lyon’s recording of her poem. Next, while stressing that “Where I’m From” was an option, not an assignment—a choice on the menu, to use our Room 249 metaphor—I modeled two ways of writing one’s own “Where I’m From, after George Ella Lyon” poem. In the first modeling, I went line-by-line and changed certain words: “oranges” for “clothespins,” “messy rooms and sunny windows” instead of “Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.” In the second, I used the “I’m from…” refrain but used a less-rigid approach: “I’m from Happy Meals and Round Table Pizza… from Virginia and North Carolina and California.”

With the menu thus expanded, I had the kids think again about what they wanted to write. Three minutes later, I used my name cards to select students randomly to share what they planned to work on—making sure the kids understood that “I need more time” was an acceptable answer. In my period 5, most of the kids planned to use the “Where I’m From” format; on the other hand, most period-2 students planned to write autobiographical stories. This sharing process bore fruit immediately; when one girl said she would write about clowns, I commented that I looked forward to reading her story, although clowns frightened me a little. Another boy, who had already shown a wonderful sense of humor, bantering but friendly, announced that he was going to write a story about clowns that eat English teachers. He actually did work on that story, too, before deciding to work on another idea the second day of workshop.

I gave the kids about ten minutes to begin writing their stories, adding the promise that we would, like athletes beginning to train, add minutes to our independent writing time each day until we were writing for thirty to forty-five minutes each class period. At the end of the period, I combined two ideas I encountered through CWP—the exit ticket, which, inspired by Bob Tierney’s “Neuron Notes” and William Strong’s exit slips, has become an indispensable part of my assessment, and the Golden Line. For their exit tickets, I asked the kids to choose their best line or sentence; for students who were still pre-writing, I added the option of writing down an idea that they planned to work on next class period.

I was pleased with how focused the kids had been during writing, but even so, as I read the exit tickets that afternoon, I was happily astonished at how good their first Golden Lines were.

Also in these last two weeks of September, we’ve established writing groups and worked to strengthen our writing community with team-building activities in those writing groups, such as the “icebreaker” Candy Introductions. While our other instructional groupings will remain flexible and fluid, students will have the opportunity to share with their writing groups at least once a week for the rest of the semester. In October, as we expand our menu of writing choices, we will also focus on instruction on how to provide effective feedback for a classmate’s writing.

**Nurturing Teachers-as-Leaders**

Collaboration between LAW and my school, however, is not limited to my efforts in my classroom. Last year, I was elected to the School Site Council at Mountain View, and became more deeply involved in examining our school’s action plan. One item intrigued and concerned me: that we were to develop a school-wide writing process with rubrics.

Here was a sentence fraught with opportunity and peril. A “process” foisted upon the teachers in a heavy-armed manner could lead to resistance and frustration among teachers, and make it more difficult for teacher-leaders to promote best practices. On the other hand, if a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative were designed in an inclusive, deliberative, democratic way, lots of good things might happen. Teachers from all disciplines would be more likely to buy in; our school-wide writing would reflect the diversity of good writing across disciplines; and we would learn about our writing instruction from the process of collaborating. Ultimately, we would become better teachers of writing, and our students would benefit.

Since effective writing instruction, of course, cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach, it seemed especially necessary to build the program with as broad a base as possible. I made this suggestion to site administrators Sandra Stevens and Roberto Salcedo, and with their support, worked to begin rethinking our Writing Across the Curriculum process by inviting representatives from different departments to join a committee that would work to create a vision for a school-wide writing program. Our hope was that this vision would reflect the wide range of writing genres that our students need to master, and the wide range of approaches that can be successful in writing instruction.

This is where our collaboration with LAW began. With Bob Land facilitating, we held several half-day meetings, for which we recruited representatives from the core departments—English, Social Studies, Science, and Math. As we continued to meet, we expanded
our committee to include teachers from other departments.

The main product of our collaboration has been an assessment framework, the Viking Traits, based on the 6 + 1 Traits Writing model. (Our school nickname is the Vikings.) Our framework has gone through several revisions based on feedback from the staff; it is a living document that we expect to change over time.

Over the summer, we began annotating student work with the Viking Traits rubric. In the next month or two, we hope to provide the entire Mountain View staff with training on how to use the rubric to assess student work—after which we intend to roll out the framework to share with students as a working draft.

In addition to helping us create the Viking Traits, Bob Land’s facilitation gave me a valuable opportunity to expand my role as a teacher-leader at my school. I acted as an unofficial co-facilitator, and this experience—and the increased credibility that Bob’s expertise and support brought me in the eyes of my peers—gave quite a boost to my confidence in my leadership abilities.

**Another Opportunity: Back to the Lab**

This summer, LAW’s YWC coordinator, Denise Ross, invited me to co-teach a course that she had brainstormed, which has developed into our first High School Writing Institute. Designed for students in grades 8-12, this course will meet on five Saturdays from October to March, and is intended not only to help students improve their writing, but also to create a sort of young writers’ network analogous to the Summer Institute.

My co-teacher Lelalois Beard and I intend to use both writing groups and explicit instruction on how to provide peer feedback in each session. Like the Young Writers’ Camp, this experience will only strengthen my efforts to use peer feedback and collaborative grouping more effectively at Mountain View.

My experience with CWP has profoundly affected the way in which I approach my work. It has given me access to a network of professionals who share my love of writing and of teaching writing, has given me opportunities to share my expertise as a teacher-leader as well as deepen my understanding by learning from other teachers, and has helped me become a more reflective, thoughtful practitioner—with a much wider repertoire of teaching strategies. The rest of the school year, with the prospect of co-teaching the High School Writing Institute and exploring the craft of writing with my students at Mountain View, promises to be full of joy and new learning. In other words, my work with CWP has made me a better teacher, and made a career I already loved even more rewarding and exciting.

**Works Cited:**


**About the Author:**

Michael Weller teaches at Mountain View High School in El Monte and is a teacher consultant for the Los Angeles Writing Project.