Thirty-four years ago, I arrived at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), fresh out of graduate school, to assume an academic position. Before I was even settled in, I returned to my alma mater, UCLA, to spend the day at the charter Summer Institute of the UCLA Writing Project. After participating in what Dick Dodge, one of the UCLA Writing Project founders, called (only partially in jest) “one-third seminar, one-third group therapy, and one-third religious experience,” I was completely hooked. I must admit that it was hard not to wax evangelical about the spirit of community engendered by this inspiring teachers-teaching-teachers model. My plans for creating a Writing Project site at UCI began that day, and our own project was established one year later in 1978.

As the youngest member of the first UCI Writing Project Summer Institute, and having the dubious distinction of possessing the least amount of teaching experience, I had a serious case of what has come to be called “the imposter syndrome.” Indeed, my biggest concern was how I could bluff my way through the one-hundred hour program without revealing how green I was. Right off the bat, I discovered, to my great relief, that in a community of learners no one person needs to have the “right” answer. Further, as National Writing Project founder, Jim Gray, reminded us again and again in the early days, there is no one right way to teach writing. The point is to have good questions about the dynamic processes of teaching and learning and to pursue inquiries and illuminate understandings collaboratively.

In the ensuing years, as the “trainer” of the UCI Writing Project Summer Institute, I have been the recipient and beneficiary of 3,400 hours of the most exceptional professional development any teacher could want. And I have often thought to myself, I can’t believe I get paid for this. So, here are just a few of the lessons learned:

• They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care—This lesson, from Bay Area Writing Project Fellow, Bob Tierney, reinforces the idea that in the classroom and in the Summer Institute as well, it all begins with creating a sense of community. Affect and cognition are inextricably related. It is hard to learn unless you care and, in turn, feel cared for. To that end, we begin our Summer Institute by devoting an entire day to having our summer Fellows create a Memory Snapshot paper about a photograph of a person, place or event that made a lasting impression on them which we celebrate by framing and displaying in a Gallery Walk where others read and post positive comments on post-it notes. The Institute, like the classroom, needs to be a safe place to share personal narratives, take risks, make mistakes, and dream big.

• Teachers of writing must themselves write—Jim Gray was right. This is the heart of the Summer Institute. I’ve seen a group erupt into hysterical laughter as one Fellow regaled us with the story of how he lost his pants while pursuing a meatball sandwich that he had left in a runaway car as it careened downhill, others well up with tears as a Fellow shared a piece on
pole dancing--a very different kind of pole dancing with a chemotherapy drip, and still others exchange AHA, Oh I get it looks as they suddenly realized the steamy poem being shared by one of our Fellows was about another teacher in the project. (They got married!)

- **Model! Model! Model!** As Kelly Gallagher says, “The Great Oz needs to come out from behind the curtain.” I have seen UCIWP Fellows at all grade levels explicitly introduce students to the cognitive strategies in their mental tool kits, think aloud as they negotiate difficult texts students have brought in to stump the teacher, and write and revise in front of their students—all in the service of demystifying the complex processes of reading and writing. I’ve also seen English learners in a 6th grade Writing Project classroom perform a skit to teach their parents what metacognition is and 2nd graders demonstrate how to provide constructive feedback to adult visitors participating in their writing groups.

- **All of the principles of instructional scaffolding that Judith Langer and Arthur Applebee have identified as hallmarks of exemplary language arts teachers hold true for professional development as well.**

  - **Ownership:** Just like students, teachers need to have buy-in and a sense of purpose as they implement what they are learning. In our Summer Institute, the Fellows help to create the agenda as well as plan the follow-up year.

  - **Appropriateness:** The tasks teachers are asked to undertake must build on their existing knowledge and research-base while challenging them to stretch intellectually. No Summer Institute looks exactly like the one that preceded it because it reflects the backgrounds, needs, and interests of the particular groups of Fellows.

  - **Structure:** Although no Summer Institute looks exactly like the one that preceded it, all Summer Institutes share a similar structure and critical routines such as Presentations, Writing Groups, Book Clubs, and Research Groups that reflect the National Writing Project teachers-teaching-teachers philosophy.

  - **Collaboration:** Through the critical routines described above, teachers have ongoing opportunities to collaborate and to co-construct knowledge in the Summer Institute.

  - **Internalization:** The goal is to support teachers as they weave Writing Project strategies into the fabric of their teaching and apply and implement strategies independently and then to turn over the leadership to them. This is why we created Writing Project II, an ongoing learning community open to Fellows from 1978 to 2011 which focuses each year on a topic voted on by the teachers and organized around their own inquiries and presentations.

You may notice that although I have tipped my hat to several outstanding teachers and scholars who influenced the UCIWP, I have not mentioned the names of specific teachers at our site. That omission is purposeful. Thirty-four years translates to almost 800 Fellows from our Summer Institute alone, and I have learned valuable lessons from each and every one. The answer to the question “Who’s training whom?” is clear; in the truest sense of Jim Gray’s vision, we have all taught each other!

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**About the Author:**

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**2011 CATE Creative Writing Contest winners**

Grades 5/6 Alexander Wang (Central Council) essay  
Grades 7/8 Arthur Hwang (Central Council) essay  
Grades 9/10 Lisa Maillard (Southland Council) poem  
Grades 11/12 Kyle Doria (Greater San Diego Council) story  

Published in this issue are:  
“In the ~Land of Milk and Honey” by Kyle Doria  
and  
“Breaking Out of Eating Disorder” by Alexander Wang  

Kyle Doria’s teacher is: Steve Rodriguez at Olympian High School, 1925 Magdalena, Chula Vista, California 91913.  
steve.rodriguez@sweetwaterschools.org

Alexander Wang’s teacher is Deborah Robinson, Windemere Ranch Middle School, 1611 East Branch Parkway, San Ramon, CA 94582  
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- California English - Vol. 17.3 - Winter 2012 - page 22 -