Reflections on a Summer Institute

By Emily Bradley and Stephanie Vanderslice

The Central Arkansas Writing Project held its first summer institute in 1999. It seemed only natural to keep a journal of that first summer and so I closed each day by sitting at my computer and reflecting on the events that had taken place. Looking back over the forty-plus, single-spaced pages, it was gratifying to watch what has now become so well known as “the model” take shape and work its magic on us. It was also revealing to notice some themes weaving their way through these pages, one of them my own alternating states of awe and anxiety as a relatively young, “green” first-time director. As I read, I also remembered how some of the writing of one of the fellows, Emily Bradley, another relatively young, “green” teacher, reflected some of that same awe and anxiety. Emily and I decided to mesh some of this writing together to capture what is so unique and special about a writing project summer institute, to render that first summer in two voices.

Emily

June 10, Three Days Before the Summer Institute

Wow!! They said to bring a piece of writing to work on. How about a totally blank page? Surely, that requires work. No? So I am taking the advice I give my kids—if you can’t think of something to write, just begin and sooner or later something will come out. So here I am, writing total nonsense. Honestly, I am wondering if I have gotten myself into a place where I don’t belong. I am no writer. I haven’t written anything substantial in years. I’m still new at this teaching thing, but I have been around long enough to know that there are many teachers with great abilities that will make anything I write look ridiculous. And what do I know to write about? I am twenty-four years old so the bank is still pretty empty. I am just now beginning to make deposits.

What will my first piece be? Poetry? The idea makes me laugh! Maybe I have writer’s block, but I think that requires you to have at some time actually written something! Tonight I will pray for divine intervention!

June 13, The Night Before the First Day

I suppose I should be more nervous. But we’ve worked hard to bring this day to fruition.

Prepping with co-directors Lisa and Pat today has really helped calm my nerves. As we were assembling the fellows’ materials, Pat held up one of the fat blue binders and said, triumphantly, “This is it folks, we’re really doing it.”

Stephanie

June 14, The First Day

Mistakes were made, as Nixon would say, but all in all it has been a great start. Exhilarating, and a bit enervating. At one point Lisa said, “I’d forgotten how quickly a writing project day goes.” I had to agree.

Our writing warm up was a letter to ourselves about what we wanted to learn and explore personally and professionally in the project. I got halfway through one myself but was soon distracted by questions from some of the fellows and never really got back.

We’re trying to be rather loose about the “guidelines” for things like writing groups and reading groups, allowing fellows to set their own rules, goals, etc. . . . I’m worried, however, that this may not give them enough of a sense of structure; already I thought I heard someone say that they didn’t feel they were getting enough explanations.

Stephanie

June 16, Day Two

Already, I’m learning so much from these fellows. I see my past and my future in them, those relatively new to education, those teaching and raising teenagers, a veteran teacher coping with four different preps and writing local newspaper columns while caring for an invalid parent.

Stephanie

June 23, Writing Retreat at Oasis Spiritual Renewal Center

En route to the Oasis, the group decided to lunch out at the Little Rock Olive Garden where we began to shed our teacher skins, to relax and share stories. Somehow, the labor and birth stories came up, all of us being women in this first group and half of us mothers. A few of these women could be my mother of course, a fact which gives me occasional fits of anxiety—who am I to tell them what time to be back from break? So far it hasn’t been a problem though, and I remind myself that one of the beauties of the writing project itself is the intersection of generations and experience.

Stephanie

June 24, Retreat Day Two

We watched Il Postino today as inspiration for writing, for exploring a teacher-student relationship of sorts. Everyone seemed moved; it was the second time I’d seen the movie, but somehow it was more compelling this time.

Emily wrote about how much it bothered her that Pablo Neruda never wrote back or visited Mario after he left his island exile, and a great discussion ensued about what is expected in a relationship between a great writer and a postman, about staying in touch and losing touch with friends, students. Of course, the older among us were more sanguine and forgiving of Neruda. We all have friends we’ve lost touch with, whether or not for lack of trying. I think if I was closer to Emily’s age (24) I would be more bothered as well.

Emily

June 24

I am very upset by the fact that Pablo never wrote or considered his friend. I see that some friendships maybe are not as special as others and that’s okay. We don’t “connect” with everyone, but I have other friends that I make time for even in my busy life. I sensed all through Mario and Pablo’s friendship that it was special to both of them. Pablo’s wedding toast, for example, was beautiful. I was particularly disgusted that he had time to tell his secretary to draft a letter to his-friend instead of taking the opportunity to write it—geez—he was a WRITER! I know that we can’t do it all, but one letter in five or six years? He could have managed that. I do actually feel some anger and resentment towards him. He was careless with someone else’s feelings and there is no schedule constraint that allows or excuses that.
Stephanie  
*June 24*

Come to think of it, when I was in the writing project myself and a bit closer to Emily’s age (well, 29!), I remember also writing about the sadness of losing touch with people.

I’ve been able to find the piece in the binder I kept from that 1996 institute. It’s about how dreams remind us of how real losses are, and of how people endure in our memories. Strange that I wrote this even before one of the most wrenching moves we’d ever made, from Louisiana, where we had put down such strong roots, to Arkansas.

Emily’s presence in the summer institute reminds us to resist the tendency to become jaded and cynical in our professions by showing us who we once were when we started out to change the lives of students.

Stephanie  
*July 6, Week Four*

After the four-day weekend, it was tough to get everyone motivated this morning. Emily helped by giving a wonderful presentation on math journals; she is such a gifted young teacher. And the idea of math journals seems nothing less than revolutionary; somehow I think if I had been asked to write about math problems in fourth grade, I might have averted some of the math paralysis that has dogged me so much of my life.

In my own experience, newer teachers get more out of the institute than they are able to put in; they are simply at that embryonic point in their careers, not sure of where they want to go. Not Emily. So energetic, so devoted to her students, so knowledgeable about the world and about education. One day this week she told us that she was going to be getting a little boy in her class next year who had a reputation as a troublemaker, but that she didn’t think he’d had any love in his life. “I can’t wait,” she said, “to get that kid and give him some love."

Emily  
*July 6, Writing Warm-Up: Why Do You Teach?*

Why do I teach? Well, lots of reasons. I could list a hundred right now. The reason that immediately pops into my mind is to create a passion for life and new things in my students. I still wake up most days eager and ready for the day ahead. I love to find new ways to “disguise” the learning into fun. I love to see students create castles, fairy tales, simple machines, circuits, and then watch their faces as they discover something new in the process. I love my students to bring in something related to what we are currently studying. It lets me know that they are looking out in the world—out of our four walls—for ways to learn.

Stephanie  
*July 14*

“I think nobody’s ever listened to me so much in my whole life.”

I wrote this down as soon as Emily said it—it is so telling about the atmosphere that has been created here.

Stephanie  
*July 20, Woolly Hollow State Park Picnic, Last Day of Institute*

We each brought a lawn chair and circled them at 9 a.m. to start a read-around. I began with the log, which I remembered I was supposed to do at 9:30 last night. Since it was late and I was strapped for ideas, I decided to just do it as an entry in my gratitude journal. I know that sounds almost too Oprah-ey for comfort; but I have to admit that this daily gratitude journal has made a big difference in my outlook on life. I usually title each daily entry with the date and “Five things I am grateful for in my life.” Sometimes I come up with a few more, but I always charge myself with listing at least five. Last night I came up with thirteen, a record for the past two and a half years I have been keeping this journal. The last entry on my list was this: “The friendship and fellowship of twelve awesome women and teachers—the CAWP first class!”

This exchange between Stephanie Vanderslice and Emily Bradley is an abridged version of a longer piece which appears on the NWP Web site at mwp.berkeley.edu.

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Dear Stephanie, Lisa, and Pat,

I wanted to save a place in my portfolio for you. After all, it was the three of you who made the institute all that it was. For me, it was maybe the greatest single experience of my life. I learned things about myself that I never knew. I grew as a writer, which is an amazing thing to me since I entered the project with the idea that I was a non-writer. Writing took me many places over the last five weeks and I can only imagine where it is going to take me in the future. You helped create an environment for us that allowed us to jump out there and write about things that had meaning for us.

You taught us not to be afraid of failure or what we might discover in our written words. We learned about many things. We are taking many ideas back to our classrooms this fall, but the most important one is that writing is more than form, it is heart, it is rewarding in itself. I know that because of the time I spent with you this summer I have developed as a writer, as a teacher and as a person. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Emily Bradley