

UConn Today

Improving the Teaching of Writing

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Connecticut Writing Project participants at a National Writing Project Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C. From left: Danielle Pieratti, English teacher at South Windsor High School and Writing Program Leader for the CWP; Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, professor of English Education and director of the Boise State Writing Project; and Elizabeth Simison, English teacher at Bacon Academy in Colchester and adjunct in English at UConn. More than 525 Connecticut teachers have attended a Connecticut Writing Project Summer Institute since it began 35 years ago.

For many years Danielle Pieratti, an English teacher at South Windsor High School, dreamed of publishing a book of her original poetry. But like most elementary and high school teachers, she spent much of her time grading student papers and preparing for classroom lessons. Participating in the Connecticut Writing Project at UConn three

years ago helped her realize her dream, with the publication of *Fugitives* (Lost Horse Press, 2015), winner of the Idaho Prize for Poetry in 2105.

“A lot of teachers love to write but don’t have time to do it. The Writing Project validates your writing practice as a teacher,” says Pieratti. “I became part of a writing group, which helped me to set some goals for myself, set deadlines, and finally get my book polished up and published. It was a vital part of that whole process for me.”



Leslie Blatteau, a world history teacher, right, and Steve Staysniak, an English teacher, work with high school seniors at Metropolitan Business Academy in New Haven as part of a High Need School Grant from the Connecticut Writing Project.

The Connecticut Writing Project is one of the oldest of the nearly 200 university-based sites in the National Writing Project, which has as its mission to improve student achievement by improving the teaching of writing and improving learning in the nation’s schools. More than 525 Connecticut teachers have attended a Connecticut

Writing Project Summer Institute since it began 35 years ago.

Providing encouragement and time for teachers to do their own writing helps them improve their teaching of writing, says Jason Courtmanche ’91 (CLAS), ’06 Ph.D., director of the Connecticut Writing Project and a lecturer in the Department of English.

“When they get in front of their students and give them instruction on how to write, they’re not making it up or basing it on their memory of doing something 20 years ago as an undergraduate,” Courtmanche says of the Connecticut Writing Project

experience. “They can say, I’m in this writing group, or I just submitted something, or just published in this journal with the Writing Project.”

The Summer Institute is an intense four-week session. Teachers are required to arrive having completed reading and writing assignments, as well as pre-research assignments. During the session, participants write and then read aloud and discuss their work. They also present their research findings.

The writing teachers take the annual Summer Institute to work on both personal creative writing and collaborative academic research. The Connecticut Writing Project publishes the “Teacher-Writer” journal annually, and the “Teacher-Researcher” journal when grant funding is available; otherwise, several research papers are posted on its website and distributed through its network of teachers. Teachers must apply for acceptance into the Summer Institute, and earn six graduate credits during the four-week session.

Research conducted by participants in recent sessions includes topics such as “Using Technology and Timely Feedback to Improve Student Understanding,” “Templates, Word Roots, and Combining Forms – a Formula for Better Science Writing?” “Integrating Blended Learning and Modern Short Stories in the Middle School Classroom,” and “Math Ideas Come Alive.”

A 2009 study in the journal *English Education* found that over a 10-year period, college faculty published more than 60 percent of the literature in journals dedicated to K-12 language arts, whereas classroom teachers published only 28 percent of the literature. The researcher, Anne Whitney of Penn State University, also noted that of the 1,772 author entries, only 42 of the classroom teachers published more than one article during the decade.

Courtmanche says the Summer Institute is “an opportunity for classroom teachers not only to write for themselves or a professor, but write for a larger audience of teachers.

It gives them scholarly credibility just like the other publications give them creative credibility.”

Lynn Bloom, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of English Emerita and former Aetna Chair of Writing at UConn, says the research conducted by the Connecticut Writing Project teachers extends throughout Connecticut schools.

“[The research] has to be something original that they can take back to their own schools and instruct their peers,” she says. “Each teacher has presented a research-based presentation that they can do in their own school or any other venue that may want it for their own in-service.”

A two-year study of the National Writing Project’s College-Ready Writers Program conducted last year by the non-profit research group SRI International noted the effectiveness of National Writing Project programs. It found that the

College-Ready Writers Program “had a positive, statistically significant effect on the four attributes of student argument writing,” and that student participants “demonstrated greater proficiency in the quality of reasoning and use of evidence in their writing.”



**The Writing Project
validates your writing
practice as a teacher.**

– Danielle Pieratti, South Windsor High School

The Connecticut Writing Project recently received two grants from the U.S. Department of Education for programs – a \$20,000 grant from the for the College-Ready Writers Program for 18 months in a high-need middle or high school for the 2017-18 school year, and a \$15,000 grant to support its Invitational Leadership Institutes, which helps teacher-leaders from diverse educational settings.

Pieratti has continued to work with the Connecticut Writing Project, most recently with the College-Ready Writers Program and leading the Teacher-as-Writer and Writing Retreat Program. She says she enjoys the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from other schools.

“It’s rewarding for me not just to be impacting my students but also other teachers as well,” she says. “I got involved with the College-Ready Writers Program for the same reason, so that I could work with more teachers, get some experience running a grant, and learn more about the National Writing Project.”

Pieratti hopes to write more, and publish more poetry, working toward a Ph.D. eventually and continuing her work with K-12 education and with future teachers through the Connecticut Writing Project. “It’s a life-changing program for a lot of people,” she says. “I think everyone should know about it.”

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