

Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project



Spring 2008

Director's Corner



by Richard Louth

It has been a very active year at SLWP. Some of the highlights in In-service, Continuity, and upcoming events:

In-service and Professional Development

Second Saturday In-service Series

We began the 2007-08

academic year with something brand new--a series of meetings on the second Saturday of each month to develop new in-service workshops. Under the coordination of Tracy Ferrington, Co-Director for In-service, a team of about a dozen Teacher Consultants was formed to develop and critique new workshops. Each second Saturday, two different SLWP TC's presented their workshops to an audience of Writing Project as well as non-Writing Project teachers, who received professional development credit for attending. After the presentations, the In-service Team critiqued each presentation. Several of the presentations were later

delivered as in-services at local schools. Team members included TC's from across the years at SLWP: Vicky Tangi, Leina Ball, Carly Zeller, Eugenie Martin, Lynne Vance, Christie Atkins, Billie Smith, Beth Meyers, Terry O'Mara, Tabitha Bankston, George Dorrill, Roman Heller, and Beth Calloway.

October Showcase

About 25 SLWP Teacher Consultants participated as presenters at the 2007 October Showcase, held at SLU's KIVA on October 27. This October Showcase attracted our largest

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Hammond Marathon: Walk, Eat, Drink, Write, Share; Don't Run!

by Terry O'Mara, SLWP Continuity Coordinator

The Spring Marathon seized the day in Hammond on May 10, 2008, or rather was seized by marathoners. Among the participants included our fearless leader, Richard Louth, George Dorrill, Tracy Ferrington, authors Dayne Sherman, Bev

Marshall, and Andre Crosby, Leina Ball, Patsy Koksall, Caroline Derbes, Annabel Servat, Roman Keller, and myself. Sonya Willie, Doris Louth, Matsuko Dorrill, Beth Meyers (via electronics) and Dayne's wife joined us for dinner.

We began about 10 AM at Cate Park between the energetic children playing on the green equipment and the silent

gazebo. Our starter word was "carry". I wrote a romantic poem. From there we divided in groups. Mine went to Garrison's Café to get coffee and tea and to sit outside in the back for a little writing and conversation. Richard regaled us with his stories about almost getting kicked out of college and interesting professors he had the fortune and misfortune of knowing. We

soaked in the flowers and smells and comfort of being with like-minded people and wrote and shared. I wrote an essay about love. What subject is more important?

Then we moved on to Pier One-Twelve, at Dane's earlier recommendation, where we were met by the rest of the group, and where we enjoyed magnificent food at

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TC Westmoreland to Co-Direct Summer Institute

by Margaret Westmoreland



It is with extreme pleasure (and a little fear) that I have accepted to co-direct both the SLWP Summer Institute and the Advanced Institute. As a former in-service coordinator, summer mentor, and general NWP nerd, it is exciting to return to the SLU Writing Center in this new position.

So what's been going on this past school year?

In November, I participated in a team of SLWP TCs including Richard Louth, George Dorrill, Tracy Ferrington, and Mary Koepp who presented at the NCTE convention in New York City. Our presentation was entitled "Teachers Teaching Teachers: A National Writing Project Model for Study Groups." The purpose was to share ways SLWP has successfully used study groups like the Summer Institute, New Orleans Writing Marathon, Second Saturdays, and several of our local in-service initiatives. Amidst the great food and entertainment of NYC,

our presentation was a success.

This Spring I've been working with the faculty at Northwood High School, the Tangipahoa Parish alternative school, to coordinate and present an in-service series called "Writing at the Center - Improving Writing across the Curriculum." This was the most challenging series I have ever delivered based on the mass number of differences among my students and theirs, not to mention the daily discipline challenges these teachers face before they ever get to the writing. Overall, though, this was a wonderful in-service opportunity for SLWP, and I'm glad to have been a part of it. As I write this, nearly all of the contents of my

classroom are sitting in my SUV. (And that is such an overwhelming feeling.) I've been on sabbatical this past semester and classroom maintenance requires I clear out for the summer. But still, to look at all of my possessions, the unused writing manuals, the "How To Teach" books, the sample student projects and papers, the 19 pads of sticky notes. How much of this do I really need to be a successful writing teacher? My summer goal is to clean up and get organized, so that when I return to my classroom in the fall, maybe I'll only need the trunk of my car and what's in my head. What's your goal?

Have a great summer, and I hope to see y'all soon.§

Upstairs at the Inn

by Vicky Tangi



There we all were, gathered in the upstairs dining room of Jacmel's, a quaint and classy country inn in Hammond. The low ceiling created a sense of intimacy, the late afternoon light filtering through the treetops giving a surrealistic touch to

our surroundings, as though we were all encapsulated in a slightly magical realm—an adult tree house with a literary touch. The electricity emanating from the collective energy of our group sparked its way through the room as people mingled and chatted while enjoying boudin balls and other regional delicacies, and sipping wine. We were all there to celebrate the culmination of our summer's writing, the creation of a radio show from selected French Quarter pieces recorded during our evening read-arounds at Le Riche-lieu Hotel in New Orleans

the previous June.

I've always loved hearing people read aloud, their own works and the works of others—stories, essays, poems, programs like the ones on NPR. I remember listening to those programs as a child and the effect of those uttered words (whether I understood them or not), sentences and paragraphs molded into strangely beautiful shapes by the voice of an unseen reader. As an adult, this love has grown. And as a member of the Writing Project, I've come to cherish these times of listening to the words of my fellow writers, and the deep respect

given to each one whose turn it is to read. This night in Hammond, however, was the first time for me to hear my own recorded voice on a radio program.

It had been 10 months since I'd written about my serendipitous encounter with Mother Tongue, a singing and guitar playing duo whose music affected me in a profound and unexpected way. Buffy Gilfoil, my friend since childhood who was working on assignment in New Orleans, had joined our group for the evening read-arounds.

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This had turned into something very powerful for her, as she was recovering from a major illness and beginning a new life. Our shared experiences in the French Quarter and the writing that followed had actually covered two nights, and I wasn't sure exactly which part of it would be on the show, but I felt so very gratified that something about our friendship of more than half a century would be immortalized by this radio show. I felt an immense thrill of anticipation, not only to hear my own piece, but all the others. Knowing the writers, having shared some of their experiences, and having already heard their pieces when they'd first been written made it all that much more exciting.

Finally, the long-anticipated moment ar-



rived, and we sat breathlessly waiting for “our” show, something we were all a part of by virtue of our membership in this magnificent community of writers, something in which we had joint ownership, regardless of whose piece was being read. Todd Delaney’s narration provided the perfect frame to connect our stories, weaving a unifying thread around and throughout the diverse pieces, making from our raw materials a single work of art. Even a power outage did not disrupt the mood, thanks to someone’s hasty provi-

sion of a battery-powered CD player and a back-up CD of what was being aired on the radio at that moment.

Hearing all the stories reminded me of so many other stories heard during our time in New Orleans, flooding me with memories of experiences in common and time spent writing. I was reminded of the courage it takes each of us to put our thoughts into words and then to release those words to the mercy of our audience. And the great trust that comes through it all.

It was important to me that my husband was at my side to be part of this event, this moment. Sometimes it is hard for spouses and families to understand what we do with this writing life, why it is absolutely vital to who we are, yet often takes us away from them. This evening spent at a secluded country inn, in

the company of writers and surrounded by their stories, gave my husband a sense of what it’s all about. As Tracy Ferring-ton so aptly concluded in her piece, “This is what we do. This is what we do.”

Leaving Jacmel’s, it seemed that a bit of the magic followed us into the car, sat with us on the road home, as we (my husband, Patsy Koksall, and I) relived the high points of the evening. Even when an ominous mass of dark clouds met us head-on, releasing torrents of blinding rain amidst bright flashes of white lightning and ensuing explosions of thunder, we were exhilarated rather than frightened. Patsy commented that this perfect storm was indeed an appropriate ending to our perfect evening, somehow serving to heighten our senses, sealing the moment and preserving it forever. §

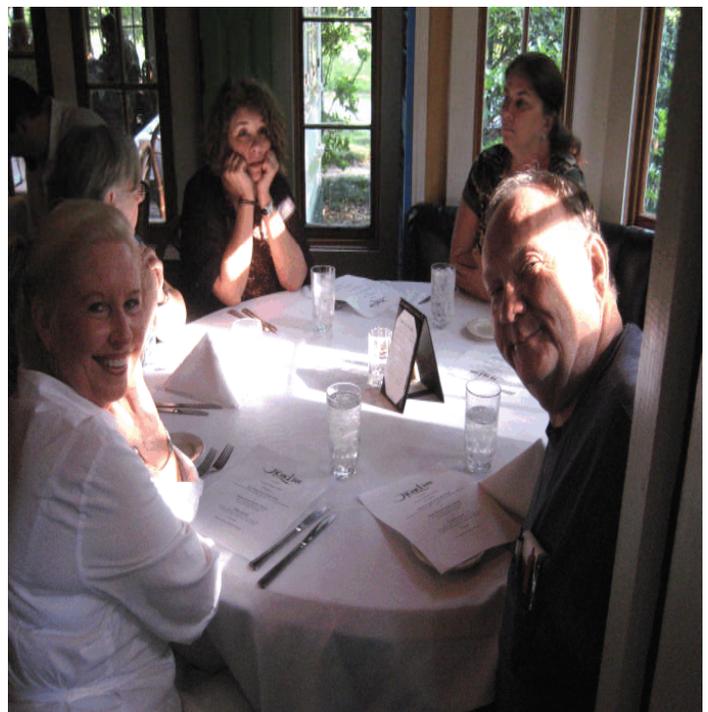
from Page 1, Hammond Marathon

a good price, basked in the shadow of a drunken parrot, and wrote and shared some more. I began an ambitious short story about a disgruntled nun – enough of that love stuff. Red, White, and Brew beckoned my immediate clique next. I mentioned something about beer and chocolate, and we were off. I tried to finish my story there. It still needs some work. A writer is never satisfied. A few of us went to La Carreta’s

afterwards; others went to wait in the air conditioning of Jacmel.

At Jacmel, SLWP members and guests enjoyed a choice of three delicious meals and each other’s company, of course. We read our favorite pieces off the day, and the day ended with storytelling, laughs, smiles, and hugs.

Good-bye until next time...



Joining the SLWP In-service Team

by Leina Ball

After completing the 2007 SWLP Summer Institute I was honored to receive an email invitation from Tracy Ferrington recruiting me to join the in-service team. After you have basked in the support of the institute it is a comfort to know there are many other opportunities within SLWP to continue nourishing the writer who has been awakened or inspired and wants more. When I joined I thought I would polish my summer presentation on using visuals as writing prompts, but I was invited to explore any new area that interested me as well. After percolating on the possibilities I decided I would like to work out a presentation on the virtues of reflective writing.

This idea in-

trigued me on various levels as it has been a productive thread in the quilt of my teaching career. I have had students evaluate what they learned through written reflection and used this as feedback to steer my planning and to inform both of us regarding what was learned in relation to what was covered. I have had students reflect as a problem solving exercise and I have written to reflect on what was working and not working in my class. Students have reflected on their experience within a particular subject or on a project. The purpose here is to discover how they feel or what they are thinking by free writing and to deepen understanding through deliberate reflection.

I was able to craft a presentation with valuable feedback from the in-

service team and visit Walker High School and Covington High School to present to their faculties where I engaged them in reflective writing exercises. Both faculties were a joy to work with and gave me new ideas about ways to use reflective writing as a tool for myself and with my students. My favorite new idea, however, has come from Dr. Richard Louth who shared about his use of reflective writing in his class. After the students write an essay he then asks them to write him or each other a letter about

what they wanted to say in their writing and these pieces are inevitably more enjoyable to read, to the point and interesting. I have found the same to be true in testing this strategy with my 8th graders. I look forward to the revelations that I expect future reflective writing exercises will provide and my fingers dance in anticipation of continued growth as an educator and writer guaranteed through my participation with future SLWP opportunities. §



I Am a Writer Eugenie Martin



This is a free-write. I learned about free-writing last summer, as a member

of the Southeastern Louisiana Writer's Project. I honestly didn't know what to expect. How do I tell you what I got from that experience? What happened to me during those five short weeks -- what did I learn that has changed everything for me? I learned that there are eyes in my heart that see things in words -- words I didn't know that I had, spangling, lovely, personal words. I learned that everyone has words that will come forth if they just give them time and opportunity. I learned that I really am a writer, and so

are you -- so are we all who will let ourselves speak in words on a page.

Each of us arrived at the SLU Writing Center last June from different schools and backgrounds. Some were English teachers, others definitely not. We ate; we wrote; we laughed; we wrote; we cried; we wrote, and wrote, and wrote - in that room, around that table, at our homes, on our porches, at weathered tables in quiet French Quarter bars and restaurants, pens and pencils on page after page after page.

Then we read to each other and discovered whole new countries, saw mean city streets, and first cars, and incredible childhoods through others' eyes. We listened to the uninterrupted voice of our fellows as they gave us eyes to see in ways we had not imagined, could not have imagined without the gift of each others words lifted from the page to the heart.

So what? Well, over this last year, the atmosphere in my classroom changed. From month to month the weather
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audience to date, with a mix of experienced and prospective teachers. Poster presenters included



Angela Corkern,, Terry O'Mara, Lynne Vance, Mary Ann Cousin, Callie Foreman, Patsy Koksall, Roslyn Varnado, Willie, Christine Mitchell, Christie Atkins, Carly Zeller, Kenita August, Leina Ball, Martin, and Olga Jackson. As well as Poster Presentations, workshops were presented by Beth Calloway (Life Storywriting), former Co-Director Avril Font (Everything Elementary: from Writing to Publishing & Editing), Eugenie Martin (Letter Writing), Leina Ball (Reflective Writing), and Lynne Vance/Mary Koepf (Teaching the Holocaust); and panel presentations by Christie Atkins, Robert Calmes, Terry O'Mara, Roslyn Varnado, Carly Zeller (Responding to Reading through Writing) and Christine Mitchell, Roman Keller, Kenita August, Angela Corkern (For

New and Prospective Teachers: Teaching Writing)

In-service Series

This was our most active in-service season in many years, with in-service workshops delivered at the following schools: Covington High School, Loranger Middle School, Monteleone Junior High School, Walker Freshman School, and Northwood High School.

Continuity

Activities included Writing Marathons: a Covington Writing Marathon in November 2007 organized by Mary Koepf, and a May 2008 Hammond Writing Marathon coordinated by Terry O'Mara, who has taken over the position of Continuity Coordinator from Mary.



SLWP was well represented at the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in New York City in November, 2007. Attendees included Tracy Ferrington, Mary Koepf, Margaret Westmoreland, George Dorrill, and Richard Louth, who presented a workshop on "Study Groups" at the NCTE Convention. Mary Koepf and Lynne Vance also presented in at the NWP Annual Meeting at a session on teaching about the

Holocaust.

Another big event was the airing of our newest Radio Show on April 11. This show, produced by KSLU General Manager Todd Delaney, featured these SLWP writers from the Summer 2007 Advanced Writing Marathon in New Orleans: Caroline Derbes, Jeralyn Spiehler, Dayne Herman, Eugenie Martin, Tabitha Bankston, David Jumonville, Brant Osborn, Vicky Tangi, Margaret Westmoreland, Tracy Ferrington The show also

featured the voices of special guests Sondra Perl, Bev Marshall, Kim Stafford, John Scanlan, Lynne Hewes.

As the show aired, National Writing Project sites across the country tuned in via Internet, and a small crowd of SLWP members and friends celebrated at Jacmel Inn. The show is now featured in a story on the National Writing Project website, and can also be heard on the NWP website (<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2563>).

From Page 4, I Am a Writer

changed, just as the seasons were changing, because I was changing too. After school, our Literacy group met in a classroom to talk and share some things that worked, others that failed. Guest speakers from SLWP offered ideas, and got us writing there in that room after school. We became a community of writers together.

From September to May, I traveled to SLU Every second Saturday to keep learning about writing and to meet with wonderful people whose sole purpose in gathering together is to enable one another to do what we all long to do - become better writers and help others to enter into the process as well. Every presentation was for me a gold mine, one that enriched me and continues to enrich as I

have the opportunity to pass on the wealth to my young writers who now come to me every day, ready and excited to write.

Somewhere along the way, I had become a writer who was teaching other writers instead of a teacher who was teaching writing to others. Human beings have such a gift. We can speak with one voice that makes a sound in the air for a moment. It hangs in the air and is gone and forgotten, or we can speak with another voice, the one I learned about last summer, the uninterrupted voice. This is the voice that speaks in scribbles on a page or characters rattled into place by these keys in front of me. This is the voice that hangs not in air but stays where it's put --not in the ear but the heart -- where it lives on long, long after we are gone. §

In the Classroom

by Jeralyn Spiehler

I've been using read-arounds (Writing Project style) this year in my classroom. My students keep portfolios of all their writing, and they have writers' notebooks (a more boy-friendly name for journals). They can pull material from either

of these sources or write something entirely new for the read-around. They type the piece and are encouraged to practice reading it aloud before the class. The desks are in a large circle (my classes are all about 30 students) when they enter the room. They are excited and there is an air of anticipation. They are about to have an

audience and an opportunity to show off their best stuff. I remind them that during read-around, they are listeners as well as readers. They are incredibly quiet and respectful of each other's reading.

On our last full day of classes, we ended the year with read-around. They asked for it, and I was happy to give them the

opportunity. I was not the only one to be in tears through the whole hour that each class met. They were good, and they knew it. They were proud of themselves and of each other. Perfect ending to their year of hard work, and I am deeply grateful to the Writing Project for teaching me this important element of a writer's life. §



Upcoming Events

WRITING RETREAT WITH KIM STAFFORD (June 7-8)

Titled "Searching for Don Quixote in the French Quarter," it's a chance to write in the company of guest author Kim Stafford and other Writing Project writers in a retreat. We take Don Quixote as our common theme because he was a searcher, a quester, someone looking for meaning in a topsy turvy world and challenging common assumptions with his dreams of beauty, glory, and romance. Where he used his lance, we'll use our pens. We'll spend a full Saturday and also a Sunday morning writing on our own, finding our own writing spots in the Quarter, and looking at the world around us and deep within. You can bring a piece you are already working on, or come to start something brand new. Or just come to fill

your journal with observations. A Social on Fri., at 6 p.m., in the VIP Suite of Le Richelieu will welcome Kim to town. We start the Retreat at 10 a.m. on Saturday at the VIP Suite of Le Richelieu Hotel with Kim's opening remarks. It is NOT a marathon, but a chance to work individually on your writing at your own pace within a community of writers under the guidance of Kim Stafford. Writers are invited to join us just for the day Saturday, or for both Saturday and Sunday morning. Kim will open and close the retreat and be available during the day to consult with writers, and there will be gatherings in the VIP Suite at the end of the day Saturday and at noon Sunday.

KIM STAFFORD DAY (Monday, June 9, Alumni Center, SLU, 9 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.)

Kim Stafford will lead a day-long workshop on "REVISITING JOURNALS IN TEACHING AND WRITING." It is open to SLWP Teacher Consultants and friends.

Registration is limited. To Register email rlouth@selu.edu and make out your \$25 check to "SLU DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION" and mail it to Richard Louth, SLU 10327, Hammond, LA 70402.

SLWP ADVANCED N.O. WRITING MARATHON (June 11-13)

We kick off the Advanced Writing Marathon with a social in Le Richelieu's VIP Suite at 6 pm on Tuesday, June 10, and then the Marathon starts Wed., June 11, at 10 a.m. It lasts till Friday at noon. You are invited to join other writers from during any day of the marathon as well as for the whole event.

Summer Institutes

SLWP's 17th Invitational Summer Institute takes place June 23-July 24, and will be the first Summer Institute co-directed by Margaret Westmoreland. George Dorrill will return again as a Mentor. New Summer Fellows include Ellen

Steigman, Jessica Netterville, Sherman FitzSimons, Linda Wisinga, Christy Mayfield, Norma Watson, Christy West, Jeanne Northrup, Antonio Muse, and Robin Perere.

Our Advanced Institute, on "Revisiting Journals in Teaching and Writing," meets June 9-19, and will be the first Summer Institute co-directed by Margaret Westmoreland. This year's Advanced Institute invites TC's to revisit the journals that they kept during Summer Institutes and to "mine" these journals and other notebooks they have kept for poems, stories, and essays that they might publish. Attending this year's Advanced Institute will be the following: Carly Zeller, Jeralyn Spiehler, David Jumonville, Leina Ball, Vicky Tangi, Nancy McKeand, Patricia Koksall, Mary Ann Cousin, Kenita August, Terry O'Mara, Annabel Servat, George Dorrill, Andre Cosby, and Megan Eddy. §

Heaven or a Writing Retreat?

By Natasha Whitton

The Summer Institute in 2005 changed my personal and professional path, not only with the experiences of those five weeks but with the network of educators that I befriended. Becoming a member of the National Writing Project opened more avenues of growth than I had imagined possible – one of those opportunities was attending a professional writing retreat. In the summer of

2006, I applied and was accepted to the Writing About Technology retreat, held each year in Nebraska City, on the bucolic acres of the Arbor Day Farm.

I was going to the retreat to work on an article about virtual writing marathons. The SLWP held its first virtual in January of 2006, with our second that summer. I was hoping to write an article that would tell others of the process, the successes and failures. Before arriving at the retreat, I was assigned a “coach,” who called to talk to me about

the project. Much like the summer institute staff who contributes to presentation planning, my coach offered help in brainstorming, responding, and troubleshooting. To have an audience before the piece was written – what a dream!

When we gathered for the opening reception at the Lied Lodge in Nebraska City, I was surprised by the amount of food and, suspecting that the buffet was meant to substitute for dinner, I loaded my plate. We were

introduced to the leadership team, NWP representatives, and asked to write some questions down for a get-to-know-you mingler with our fellow participants. Then, we were led to dinner in the lavish restaurant overlooking the farm which had once been owned by the Morton Salt family. Although I was full from my earlier snacking, I could not resist the meal, and this extravagance set the tone for the week.

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SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA WRITING PROJECT

Technology in the Writing Classroom

July 28-31, 2008

10am-2pm daily

213 DVickers Hall

Southeastern Louisiana University
Hammond, LA 70402

This open institute of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project will explore diverse applications of technology in the writing classroom, including Second Life, Geocaching, Tapped In, and online paper/peer review. All K-college teachers are invited. To register, contact Natasha Whitton, nwhitton@selu.edu

Technology News



Are you interested in the uses of technology in your classroom? What role does technology play in your teaching? Do you want to share your ideas with others? Please consider joining the SLWP

Technology Team by contacting Tasha at nwhitton@selu.edu. According to the National Writing Project, “Technology teams share a common goal: all members are dedicated to helping writing project site leadership meet local needs and priorities through the wise integration and implementation of technology.” Our SLWP Team will work to improve our offerings for area K-college teachers and consider new programs to better facilitate our organizational goals. §

From Page 7, Heaven or a Writing Retreat

After dinner, we met to write a contract with ourselves for our week's writing projects and to form response groups based on our topics. In the morning, we were given a brief oral tour of the farm before enjoying a mini-writing marathon on the grounds, aptly named "The Apple Crawl." This fumbled writing got our pens moving and I returned to our conference room space ready to begin organizing my article.

It is hard to describe a writer's heaven



because individuals have such different needs, but the writing retreat did its best to come close. Our main room, was spacious with a blank wall for those who needed concentration and a wall of windows for those who preferred the outdoors. We were certainly not limited to this room, but if you got stuck, you could always find a staff member or someone from your response group here. The National Writing Project provided laptops for those who had not brought their own and gave each participant a flash drive.

Just outside our conference room was a long bar that was covered in a rotating menagerie of food that changed every two hours. The bar area behind the snacks had soft drinks, coffee, and hot water. In addition to the foods that one might expect in a convention center setting – trays of cookies or crudités – we were treated to jars full of

chocolate candy bars, granola bars, and whole fruit. Whenever I reached a frustrated pause, I wandered out to freshen my cup, only to discover that the food fairies had left some new indulgence for the palette. When a longer walk was required, I meandered across the grounds to the Pie Garden Café for an apple slush.

Since this particular NWP-sponsored writing retreat focused on technology, we also enjoyed an evening of show and tell, what we called the Tech Smorgasbord. The staff set up a room as a computer lab and each participant demonstrated a website or assignment-based project that involved technology. Rather than using a presentation format, we were encouraged to move around the room, as if to view poster sessions, and interact with each piece.

In addition to meeting our physical needs, providing each par-

ticipant with writing coaches and a response group, and asking us to spend brief group sessions writing on topics such as audience and purpose, we were visited by Robert Brooke, the editor for the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series and board member for *College English*. He brought with him letters that he had written to various authors in response to their work prior to publication, and discussed the editorial process.

By week's end, I had a clear first draft and a community that promised to continue support when I returned home. I had agreed to work on the anthology for the retreat and knew that I would keep in touch with many of my new friends. I left grateful for the opportunity to write in a perfect setting, to learn from eager and excited colleagues, and to return with a refreshed purpose – a truly heavenly experience. §

The Virtual Writing Marathon

By Natasha Whitton

I have found my way to Molly's at the Market on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. The bar is alive with the sounds of my fellow writers, glasses clink, laughter erupts, pens scribble, and my fingers click on the keys of a laptop balanced precariously over the bar to maintain my fragile wireless connection – the spark that has made this writing marathon experience distinctive. During Hurricane Katrina, Molly's was closed only briefly and reopened as soon as the rain and wind passed, sustaining minimal damage as did much of the Quarter. Now, the jukebox is pumping out selections chosen by George Dor-rill, a member of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. For each writing marathon held in New Orleans

since 1996, we scatter ourselves throughout the city, but Molly's is the magnet that draws us together at the end of the day before our final read around.

In the Beginning: The New Orleans Writing Marathon

The SLWP created the model for the Writing Marathon over a number of years beginning in 1992. Richard Louth, site director, has written a thorough description of this process for *The Quarterly*; by 2006, frequent and consistently positive marathons were a staple of the program. Starting with freewrites as described by Natalie Goldberg in *Writing Down the Bones* and adding a city that was as inspiring as Ernest Hemingway's Paris in *A Moveable Feast*, these marathons are based on rather simple rules. We gather for at least several hours of writing and proclaim at the start, "I am a writer." We split

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From Page 8, The Virtual Writing Marathon

into smaller groups, find a place to write, share what we have written, give each author a verbal “Thank you” and move on to find a new location to repeat these steps. The model encourages fresh writing, interesting stories and rich descriptions of place. At the end of the day, we gathered to allow each participant to read one piece and are amazed at our productivity, inspiration, and renewed feelings of community. Using these concrete suggestions, writing marathons have been recreated in cities and towns around the country, in classrooms, and at conferences, but we had never successfully replicated this environment online.

As the SLWP leadership team prepared for the January 14, 2006 marathon, we were faced with a number of challenges. That fall our world had seemed to end, and we now referred to time as pre-Katrina and post-Katrina. Many friends who had visited us in the past for marathons in New Orleans wondered about what it would be like after the storm and a number of our Teacher Consultants were relocated and unable to join us for a Saturday of writing in the city.

Taking it Online

On January 9th, I received an email from Richard that began, “Tasha: I have a dumb yet ambitious question.” He went on to suggest that we find a way to invite writers to participate in our Saturday marathon from a distance, ending his email with the encouraging line: “Is it possible? Idiotic? Too late? Logistically crazy? RL”

Being naïve and rather headstrong, I was positive that we could put together a successful online marathon in less than a week and plunged ahead with my own vision of how it would work. I chose an online space that would allow us to post writing while simultaneously chatting as we do during a marathon (www.tappedin.org). Later in the week, Richard and I “met” online to test our new space:

Tasha:

This is Richard writing on Melanie's computer. I had a bit of a problem finding this spot--that is getting to the "discussion" area. We might have to carefully review how to get there--where it is in relation to "groups". I might not have gone to "Marathon" either, from the slwp page, nor have known that to post my piece, I had to hit "reply".

*Anyway, I see now that **HERE** is where we post writings.*

I will now go to "SAY" to talk to you.

In order to follow the guidelines that we used for a traditional New Orleans marathon, we agreed on the discussion versus chat space delineation but were concerned about how we would follow the “no response” rules of a marathon in an online environment. Would we need to reply to each post with a “Thank you” to acknowledge the piece of writing or could we say that in the chat space? I pointed out that in a writing marathon the writers generally inadvertently get an immediate non-verbal response because they hear the laughter or sighs in the room as they read and can see the looks on people’s faces. Would the chat space and its emoticons (which I had not yet learned how to use) be enough to make people comfortable with the lack of response?

We were also concerned about the kind of writing that this event would solicit. We had never chosen a theme for a New Orleans marathon, so most participants generally wrote about the places or people around them. Were we going to ask writers outside the city to write about New Orleans or their own spaces? Were we going to take the time to read and be influenced by those places or were we going to stick to our post-Katrina city? And how would we do virtual read rounds? Would we determine time limits and reading groups or would we be more open? Would we put local writers in a group with those around the country? Our most basic concern was that the entire venture would fail based on lack of planning. We might lose people to the maze of our online environment, or they might get through and find no one there. The primary concern for us was the strength of the writing, and we did not want to see our words sacrificed to the technology. Ultimately, our decision amounted to “let’s wait and see.” If we anticipated all the problems, we would never send out an invitation to let others join our chaos, so the solution was to try and perhaps to stumble.

We did not send out detailed instructions and trusted that our veteran participants would be able to apply their experience of a traditional marathon environment to our online space. We did not designate groups or give instructions for the type of writing that should be submitted. Read rounds were not scheduled, and there would be no time limits imposed on writing.



Online Participants: Longing for the Big Easy

On the morning of January 14, 2006, I sat in Richard’s apartment in the French Quarter with a borrowed laptop surrounded by writers from SLWP. We had told

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our virtual participants that someone would greet them at 10am, but the wireless connection was not working. I fidgeted through the marathon reminders: 1) You are a writer; 2) Keep groups small; 3) Enjoy yourself and your writing. I heard the silent screams of frustrated online users beckoning me, so I left quickly after confirming that Richard was the only other local participant who had brought a laptop and that he would join the distance participants as soon as he could.

At the corner, I saw that the local coffee shop was open and appeared to have a wireless connection. As I wrote in my first freewrite of the day at 10:41am, "Seeing several laptops open encouraged me to stop in and check it out. As soon as I logged on,



I found Leigh waiting in the SLWP room. Leigh and I were in the summer institute this past year, and I was excited to see a familiar screen name. We chatted some, and I briefly met Marty and Anthony [Tony] from other parts of the country . . . I'm not entirely sure how this online writing marathon will work, but I am excited about it. The technology is the tool that will bring us together, but I wonder

what sort of writing will be inspired by the space. Will my own writing continue to be meta-writing project/technology related?" In total, there were 13 participants that day: seven from outside of the state, four Louisiana writers who were not in the city, and two of us writing from New Orleans – more than we expected with the late notice.

Leigh turned out to be the only online participant that I had met in person, and most of the other writers did not seem to know each other. But, everyone shared a love of New Orleans and writing marathons. The chat space kept us together and alleviated the awkwardness of our introductions. As each participant logged on, I would greet them, asking where they were from and how the weather was there. Tony Iannone, UNC Charlotte WP in North Carolina, quickly asked, "so. . . how do we get started?? I'm excited . . ." That sentiment was echoed throughout the room, and the discussion space began to fill with freewrites.

Many participants posted an initial piece about their space:

Cat on my shoulder. Snow on the ground. In a dream house, in a loft office just for me. A room of my own. Grown daughters who come to visit and help. In Roslyn

90 miles from the university where I work in a dream job half time. – Janine Brodine, Puget Sound WP

The desire that emerged, however, over and over again was to write about the city and the yearning of those around the country to be where I was.

Sitting here, on a grey, chilly morning, imagining what it's be like to back there in New Orleans, when these random thoughts assert themselves from the looping soundtrack that runs continuously through the landscapes of my thoughts:

Redemption Song by Bob Marley

Prayer for New Orleans by Charlie Miller

We are One and Yes, We Can Can by Allen Toussaint

World I Never Made by Dr. John

Cryin' in the Streets by Buckwheat Zydeco

Lousiana 1927 by Randy Newman

and Back Water Blues by Irma Thomas ~ which takes me to earlier renditions by Bessie Smith and Dinah Washington. . . . going back an issue to the one with the cover featuring a fallen angel against a background of storm debris left in Katrina's wake. . . .and settling on Cornell

West's exhortation reminding us that before Katrina, during Katrina, and after Katrina, there looms an even more powerful destructive force that he calls Povercina. . . .Povercina, usually obscured and shadowlike behind a scrim of flim-flam illusions, suddenly laid bare when Katrina ripped through the scrim with such force to lay bare the ill effects of race and class upon generations of poor Black folks, poor white folks, and poor immigrants from the Caribbean, the Indian, the Pacific who'd left their native lands to cast their lot and take their chances in the Crescent City. . . .and I wonder how did the Rockin' Bowl (Mid City Lanes?) fare when Katrina hit and the levees broke? or that restaurant called NonPariells, that we reached just before closing time one night after the Heritage Jazz Fest back in 2000 or was it 2001? –David

Christiano, Bay Area WP

I'm enjoying your posts, desperately jealous of the laughter, the camaraderie, the lines for coffee and the New Orleans chatter. How lucky you are. How lucky I am to be able to be part of it all from way up here. Thanks, ya'll. –Ellie Bryant, VWP

Participants also begin to notice that I was the only person writing from New Orleans.. Many of them wanted to know about the French Quarter after the storm. As one participant wrote,

I'm disappointed (mildly), surprised?, that there were no posts during the first couple hours that told me much about N.O., but most of the writers are probably not

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*posting in the virtual space, they are writing in notebooks and sharing in small groups. Most of us in the virtual space are the *outsiders* who have come almost voyeuristically. New Orleans, a magical place that became such a focal point of national media as disaster showed us a side we had not seen, and showed us scenes of poverty and desperation, scenes of destruction that are unimaginable to most of us in our country. Here in Appalachia we know poverty, also, though it is not so crowded, and not so black. We know flooding, too, but not so widespread and not so deadly. In 1993, the Mississippi and its tributaries flooded for much of the spring and early summer. That summer, I took my daughter, age 16 at the time, and her boyfriend, out to do some volunteer work. We stayed in a church basement and for a few days washed the siding on houses, carried debris and trash, swept streets, etc. of a small town in Missouri -- I can't even remember the name. I remember feeling a bit like a refugee myself, sleeping on a cot, getting free meals, but we all felt good to be doing something, anything, to help. It was hard work that we weren't used to. We went to bed tired. We came home feeling virtuous, despite the fact that our contribution was small. Maybe I will look into what I could do in N.O. this summer. --Paul Epstein, CWVWP*

Building Community through Technical Difficulties

At noon, I learned to my surprise that in the post-Katrina economy, my coffee shop could only stay open until noon, so I needed to pack up and find a new wireless connection. As I walked toward Frenchman Street and The Café Rose Nicaud, I felt a rising wave of panic and broke out in cold sweat. I was concerned that our fragile community would break in these minutes while I could not reach them. No one else in New Orleans had yet to make in online.

I found a group of local writers gathered for lunch in my new location, and when I logged on I decided to try



to bridge the gap between the online participants and the conversation at my table. The Louisiana teachers were talking about standardized testing, and one teacher related a story about an administrator who wanted her to keep her scores low so that when they were compared the next year, there would be a significant jump. I moderated the discussion, but then the restaurant closed at 2pm, another casualty of Katrina.

For my last freewriting session of the day, I ended up in Molly's on the Market, where another local writer, Richard, joined the online group. In the last moments of the day before the scheduled readaround, we decided to write a poem together:

The wind blows with no compassion –Tony
Through leafless trees flung with clothes – Tasha
And leaves me wishing for a moment – Richard
To pick them all up . . . but alas –Tony
The task overwhelm'd me – Tasha
Trees uprooted, bury all sanity – Margaret
I lift myself to the task – Tony
And fight for life again – Margaret
A fight that must be fought – Tony
In the face of uncertain outcomes – Ruth
We come together to face the task – Margaret
Never knowing what will come of our efforts –Tony
I brace myself, digging deeply with my roots – Lynne

For the readaround, I had to shut down and move to our final location, the apartment of a friend of the SLWP. When I logged on, the space was quiet, but I chatted with myself about the people who were reading, so that I would have a record of our final words. Margaret logged on briefly and listened, asking that I read one of her pieces aloud. The spirit of our online friends lingers in the room and makes us feel bigger than we are.

Aftermath and Reflections

After the marathon was over, we went home tired but satisfied. The local participants agreed to go home, log on, and find out what people had been writing. Several marathoners chose to post summaries of their experiences.

I found myself tied to my computer for longer than I expected. I sat there for more than two hours. I met people I hadn't met before. I think that it would take a longer session for me to get comfortable writing with people I didn't know. In marathons, I tend to stick with people I know. I like how you keep this whole idea moving forward, not happy to let it just be, but always changing and thinking and re-thinking. No matter what happens, it is always good to keep reinventing. --Margaret Simon, Acadiana WP

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I found the virtual marathon to be both frustrating and rewarding which is not all that different than I most often find writing. Like being in any writing group, it was easy to get distracted in conversation, in this case the chat room. However, unlike a writing group, I found it harder to walk away because being in the chat room gave me a sense of being really connected. For a number of reasons I chose to stay home and write and I found I missed the provocations of changing locations. Obviously, there is something very different about sitting at home in a familiar (too familiar!) environment, but I was surprised at the depth of the difference. I definitely think the experience was worthwhile. --Ruth Perkins, Oregon WP

In reading over the entries and replies tonight, I came to realize that the more we do this kind of marathon, the more we will realize about its potential. I think this first virtual marathon will be quite different in nature from our 6th. I also think that there is real potential in doing a marathon with none of us leaving home, or with ALL of us



writing alone by ourselves in our home towns (and no central group out on the streets like we had in N.O.). I also think that we will discover real potential in longer marathons -- maybe over an entire week-

end. Another thought I had was that we need to realize what an online marathon cannot do. It can't give us the nonverbal responses like laughter, etc., that are so important in live marathons. However, we need to look carefully at what the virtual marathon DOES have that the live one DOES not, and think of how to channel anything that the virtual one has. I think there is potential for virtual marathoners to be adapted, if you will, by individual small groups in the live marathon, and that the group might read the virtual person's entry aloud so that it becomes part of the common experience. I would like to see how that affects everyone. I think there is potential for periodic online marathons. Could a STUDY GROUP at a site commit to meeting once a month for an online marathon, with each member working on some sustained piece and sharing it with the others. For instance, everyone doing a chapter a month of a book of some kind that each person commits to. What we are essentially looking at here is community and building different kinds of writing communities. I also noticed that a theme which emerged and interested me was how as writers we must be selfish sometimes to protect our writing time. And that whole conflict between our writing lives and other lives is some-

Hello Friends

By Melanie Plesh

It's hard for me to say this, but writing and I have abandoned each other since Katrina. I try to understand why but I can't even make myself think it through in my journal. I feel clogged up somehow. Natalie Goldberg (*Writing Down the Bones*) would tell me to obsess, in writing, over the things that are clogging me but, I don't know, it's just not happening. Most of the time I feel okay about this and believe that it is a time for something else, some other way of moving through the world. But sometimes I feel lost and sad and miss it.

The situation has affected my work in my classroom, though not necessarily in a bad way. After Katrina, with Douglass High School closed, I returned to Mandeville High School and have been teaching 9th and 10th grade gifted students. I put together a program for their reading based entirely on what I felt was the best. My favorites have always been *The Odyssey* and anything by Dostoevsky and anything by Shakespeare. *The Oresteia*. The Oedipus plays. This year a friend loaned me a video of *Oedipus at Colonus*, a gospel version starring Morgan Freeman, and we watched

that. We read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Faulkner. We even read *Atlas Shrugged*. But this year we read Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and that's what I want to write here about.

I never knew. All I'd ever read of the *Divine Comedy* was *The Inferno*, and that only once. This year we read all three canticles aloud and I now know why T.S. Eliot said, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them —there is no third." I think *The Divine Comedy*, especially *Paradiso*, may be the most beautiful thing I've ever read. And now that I think of it, and my current dilemma with being unable to write, I'm remembering something toward the end of the *Paradiso* where Dante, getting closer and closer to the light, finds himself unable to find the words to describe his beloved Beatrice: "Here I concede defeat. No poet known, comic or tragic, challenged by his theme to show his power, was ever more outdone." (Maybe that's my challenge, to find the theme to show my power.)

We didn't do as much writing as has been my wont all my years as a teacher but what we did write was interesting. I suggested to them that it would be interesting to think of the **Continued on Page 13**

thing that interests me and that I would like to hear more about. --Richard Louth, SLWP

Since that first marathon, we have held others with different groups of writers and discussed the possibilities – what if we were all in our homes writing for a day? How would a virtual marathon work in the classroom? Between classrooms? How does this format support "good" writing? Perhaps an online community can pull us together as Molly's does in the French Quarter. §

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world in the last 700 years since Dante wrote his *Inferno*, to think of acts and mindsets that would land a person in Dante's inferno today. They got in groups and came up with a long list of such infractions, which I wrote on the board. Then we grouped the infractions into categories. Then the students went online and looked up stories of people who had perpetrated such atrocities, and they each created a canto of their own in which they told the perpetrator's story and punished them accordingly, in terza rima with a rhyming couplet at the end. And, just like Dante did, they

had to come up with a guide. The three groups chose Ellen Degeneres, Morgan Freeman, and Sean Connery to lead them. Then they had to write a letter to said guide explaining what they'd done, and why they chose him/her as the guide. And then they mailed their cantos and letters. The group that wrote to Ellen said something in their letter like they'd like to ask her to go to hell with them.

That's all I have for the moment. Thank you, Richard, for asking me to contribute to the newsletter. It's painful but good to be writing again.

Melanie

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