Workshop enriches South African voices

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Until the lions tell their own stories, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter, an African proverb says. And the tool to weave those stories into culture and history, empowering individuals and nations, is writing.

So nations with low literacy levels, such as South Africa, struggle to find their voices and stake out their identities, says Leketi Makalela, a University of Limpopo professor.

"A nonliterate nation cannot develop," he said Thursday at the University of Texas at San Antonio. "Until we produce our own materials and tell our stories by ourselves, for ourselves first, we can never be free."

Makalela, who teaches English and theater, just finished San Antonio Writing Project's annual five-week Summer Institute at UTSA, which helps teachers teach writing. Now he'll return to South Africa and create the Limpopo Writing Project as an offshoot.

Two South African teachers he brought to the workshop will serve as his co-directors. Nakedi Makgoba teaches high school English, and Ngokoana Dikgari is a curriculum adviser at the University of Limpopo.

But Makalela will go a step further than San Antonio's program, which is part of the 35-year-old National Writing Project. He hopes to get 10 teachers a year to each write a book.

"You cannot be a teacher of writing if you do not know how to write yourself," he said. "Beyond that, we need to produce locally inspired materials."

Local stories threaded into South Africa's 11 official languages, including English, will be the best way to reach students probing and honing their inner voices, Makalela said.

There is no one right way to teach writing, according to the National Writing Project, though some practices are better than others.

Dikgari sees it as a process.

"Writing in a way encourages individuals in terms of thinking," she said.

Everybody can, and should, make the journey from thoughts to written words, Makgoba said.

"We are all writers," she said. "Everyone has got something to tell."

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