Integrating Author Visits into the Summer Institute

by Samuel Totten

Henry Tsai, a historian who writes about Chinese eunuchs, has visited the invitational summer institute of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project (NWAWP). The same is true of Miller Williams, the poet who wrote and delivered the inaugural poem for President Bill Clinton's second inauguration. We've also met Thomas Cochran, a high school teacher whose young adult novel Roughnecks is about a sensitive kid who plays hard-nosed football in the Texas oil country; and Joan Hess, author of the Claire Malloy and Arly Hanks mysteries set in the Ozarks. Over the past six summers, these and many others writers have engaged in conversations with our institute participants.

The co-directors of NWAWP consider these conversations integral to our summer institute. The visiting writers provide insights into the way they work, cumulatively underscoring the understanding that no one way of writing is sacrosanct. And they contribute to a forum that allows teachers to engage in discussions about writing in genres as varied as poetry and young adult fiction. These colloquies sometimes motivate teachers to try these genres themselves and to introduce these forms into their classrooms. Some of these authors, in fact, follow up these sessions at the institute with classroom visits at which the writers work with the students of these teachers.

Overall, this contact between our teachers and these folks who write for a living is a morale booster. The guest authors frequently comment on the teachers in their past who nurtured their interest and passion for writing, and comment on the vitally significant work the teachers are doing both in the summer institute and in their classrooms. And as a result of these encounters, some of our teachers have been inspired to send their writing out for potential publication.

Some may be concerned that bringing in guest authors will result in minimizing the expertise of the teachers, who will be tempted to sit passively, taking in the words of a "guru." That is a real concern, but one that we headed off from the first time we implemented this component into our program. These sessions, each of which is scheduled for an hour and a half to two hours during the afternoon of the last session of each week, are anything but passive.

First, we ask the authors to invite questions throughout their talks, instead of simply entertaining the teachers' questions at the end. We know that by the end of the week, these hard-working teachers are in no mood to put up with a "talking head"; an engaging, worthwhile session needs to be one in which teachers raise questions, request additional explanations, and explore those areas of writing and/or publishing that most concern them. They'll ask, "How can you write about the backwoods folks without stereotyping them?" or, "How do you know when a poem is finished?" Also, we encourage the authors to engage the teachers in writing and sharing. When acclaimed poet Miller Williams spoke about the difference between words with Germanic and Latinate roots, he asked the teachers to write the same paragraph using each set of roots. The writing that resulted was hilarious, thought provoking, and an excellent foundation for developing an engaging lesson for the teachers' own students.

Finally, we find that since many of the authors are also teachers or professors, they are naturally interested in how our institute teachers teach writing. Because of this concern, many of the presentations move in the direction of a discussion of best practice about the teaching of writing.

In these ways, we ensure that visits by authors are not perceived as talks by experts to a group of passive novices. We establish guidelines for the authors, which we send to them prior to their visits. This preparation goes a long way toward insuring that in these sessions both the guest speakers and the teachers will share and learn from one another.

As for locating potential authors, we pursue four different avenues. First, we ask teachers if they know of any authors who have written something interesting and are engaging as speakers. Second, we conduct an annual review of the "Faculty Authors" section of the university bookstore. Third, throughout the year, we scan the local newspaper for reviews of works by local authors and talks or presentations by local authors. Fourth, several times a year, we give attention to the shelf entitled "Local Authors" in the Fayetteville branch of the Barnes and Noble bookstore.

Most "university towns" are graced with a population of published authors, many of great talent and some of considerable fame. Writing project sites are normally located at colleges or universities. So it's clear to me that what we have done at Fayetteville could be done at many other summer institutes.

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<th>Dates to Remember</th>
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| **April 21-25, 2003**  
American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago  
[www.aera.net](http://www.aera.net) |
| **April 25-26, 2003**  
NWP Urban Sites Conference, Santa Barbara, California  
[www.writingproject.org/Programs/usn/events.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Programs/usn/events.html) |
| **May 4-8, 2003**  
International Reading Association 48th Annual Convention, Orlando, Florida  
[www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org) |
| **June-August, 2003**  
NWP E-Anthology: Summer Institute Writings and Conversations  
[www.writingproject.org/Programs/online/eanth/index.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Programs/online/eanth/index.html) |
| **June 11-15, 2003**  
NWP Directors Retreat, Walker Valley, New York  
[www.writingproject.org/Calendar/dirretreat.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Calendar/dirretreat.html) |
| **June 26-29, 2003**  
NWP Ell Network Writing Retreat, Leavenworth, Washington  
[www.writingproject.org/Programs/ell/events.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Programs/ell/events.html) |
| **June 26-29, 2003**  
NWP Professional Writing Retreat, Santa Fe, New Mexico  
[www.writingproject.org/Calendar/writersretreat.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Calendar/writersretreat.html) |
| **August 7-10, 2003**  
NWP Professional Writing Retreat, Kingston, Rhode Island  
[www.writingproject.org/Calendar/writersretreat.html](http://www.writingproject.org/Calendar/writersretreat.html) |
| **September 12, 2003**  
NWP new-site proposals due |
| **November 20-22, 2003**  
NWP Annual Meeting/NCTE Annual Convention, San Francisco, California (30th Anniversary) |

For more information about NWP events, visit [www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org).