Thirty-six hours. A mere twelve hours longer than Jack Bauer, from the hit show “24,” has to complete his assignment and change the world from a state of chaos to sound global security is what we had to challenge the hearts and minds of middle and high school migrant students attending the 2009 UC Merced Migrant Summer Young Writers Academy. The work entailed teaching and challenging Migrant Ed students to learn and think deeply about the writing process and find the value in their own experiences as springboards for understanding texts. In the writing academy students learned the value of clear and concise written communication for varying audiences. They studied various writing genres, were taught how to write short responses, how to write process personal narrative essays and analytical responses to literature. Students learned and applied a wide variety of revision strategies in a comprehensive manner and learned how to connect their ideas, personal experiences or analytical responses to literature in a thoughtful manner.

Our students had differing levels of language and writing skills. Most, if not all, had never written a formal process essay. Two students were non-English speakers (level 1) and the remaining twenty students ranged in CELDT (California English Language Development Test) from level 3 to 4 in language proficiency. From the first day we greeted our students we conveyed to them the rigorous writing standards and expectations of this program. The writing academy was not going to be a remediation summer school program but an intensive reading and writing academy that would help them be prepared for the challenges of middle school, high school and even college. Our writing academy required from each student discipline, participation and focus. Students were quickly made to understand that they would be going through a powerful learning experience. The following is a brief outline of our writing curriculum:

1. Journaling and developing voice
2. Description- Writer’s Workshop
   • Magnify moment
   • Peer and Teacher Conferencing
   • Show don’t tell
   • What is Revision?
   • Peer editing
   • Adding dialogue

3. Narration
   • Elements of narrative writing
   • Personal Narrative Essay

4. Response to Literature
   • What is response to literature?
   • Annotating- Having a dialogue with the text and the author
   • Discovering theme
   • Elements of a response to literature response paragraph
   • Introduction – Hooking the reader
   • Body- Where’s the evidence?
   • Conclusion – Answer the So What?
   • Revision strategies
   • Peer revision/conferencing
   • Post-publishing

That’s Right. Thirty-Six Hours
by Diana Jiménez and Diane Shaw

Shown here: The Juggler (23” x 31”, pastel, by K.D. Benton)
In 36 hours these students experienced the process of daily journal writing, writing personal narratives, descriptions, analytical responses to poetry and literature. The experience required each student to explore the writing process through continuous oral communication for clarification, vocabulary building and usage and accessing academic language. Students listened, made inquiries through discussion, read and were read to. We integrated their prior knowledge and their life experiences to build new knowledge, which they applied through written practice and exploration. They were introduced to a powerful palette of language that they could manipulate to reach their audience and begin to understand their individual voice and style.

The twenty-two students in attendance worked on journals for approximately twenty minutes at the start of each day. The journal entries became the canvas page for the application of revision strategies taught through mini-lessons. We modeled and demonstrated the application of each strategy in our own journals. We wrote alongside the students demonstrating that every writer goes through a similar process, and that it is the depth of reworking through the process that brings about the result of clear and concise communication of the heart and the ideas of the mind.

Our four-days-per-week, three-hours-per-day schedule was packed with rigor, energy, laughter, the sharing of ideas and experiences, and the sense of community as students, as English Learners, as children of immigrant parents, and as writers. For instructors it can often be a straightforward procedure to quantify and explain the lesson plans and curriculum for the academy, but what is complicated to describe is the essence of the honest and heartfelt conversations that generated the sense of community and trust, and which are the foundation for the success of this writing program. Diana talked with the students about her experiences as an English Learner. Her family constantly moved (not just from the U.S. to Mexico and back to the U.S., but also moving within California) and shared the successes and struggles of living in poverty and becoming the first person in her family to finish both high school and college. The students were an understanding audience who readily identified with the cultural expectations, hardships and adversities familiar to English Learners. The sharing of our common humanity and struggles provided the bond for understanding how education is one of the keys of success, and a thriving education includes strong writing skills.

Three weeks flew by. On our last day together we celebrated the work of the UC Merced/Migrant Young Writers Academy students with an exposition of their work. The celebration was well attended by parents, family members, and teachers, by administrators from the middle school and high school in Gustine, by Merced County Office of Education personnel, bus drivers, a school secretary and a local newspaper reporter. Every student had a family member present. The students sat proudly together wearing their blue with gold lettering UC Merced YWA t-shirts. The walls of the cafeteria proudly displayed the writings of every student. Each student essay on display included all of the drafts, revision strategies, and prewriting notes to demonstrate that the final draft was the result of hours of hard work and great effort. We also displayed pictures, posters, poetry lessons, revision notes, and vocabulary work. So much transpired in the course of the three weeks; 36 hours – a day and a half of intensive, rigorous, high expectation of teaching and learning.

After a few brief words to the parents, students and friends, we presented each student with a UC Merced embossed certificate and many parents proudly captured these moments on camera. After the certificates were distributed, parents were given the opportunity to look at student work and talk with us. The conversations that ensued during this time were truly remarkable. We had parents asking us questions about writing at the high school level, the high school exit exam, college admission requirements, and a solid interest in the high school curriculum, and of course, whether we would have another writing academy the next summer. The celebration gave parents a clear insight into the importance of writing well and how their continued commitment to education is essential for student achievement. Our mission was accomplished.

The Young Writers Academy can only be humbly described as an experience of “doing” writing and whole-heartedly believing that writing can be successfully accomplished by every student. The result has been an extraordinary success. Students experienced writing success within a supportive environment that accepted every student’s linguistic ability and allowed for their physical, verbal, intellectual, and emotional growth. A delicate balance of all these features within the framework of structured curriculum standards and high expectations, along with the rigor of purposeful hard work, produced a well-orchestrated blend of human experience through the power of words.

Our craft has been reenergized and our hearts touched and uplifted by these wonderful and kind students, who gave us the opportunity to share with them and learn from them.

**About the Authors:**

Diana Jiménez teaches freshmen and senior English and AP Literature and Composition at Delhi High School in Delhi, California.

Diana Shaw has many years of teaching experience at the elementary school level; this year she is a teacher on special assignment for Merced City School District in Merced.