In the Spotlight: Boston Writing Project's Denise Patmon
Denise Patmon has been a co-director at the Boston Writing Project for fifteen years. She taught middle school language arts in the Boston Public Schools in the mid-1970s and then moved on to become the multicultural coordinator for Brookline Public Schools, a suburban district outside Boston. In 1981, Denise was hired by Boston Writing Project director Joe Check and co-director Peter Golden to coordinate a special NEH-funded project to provide training and research in integration, multiculturalism and the teaching of writing in urban schools.

While directing the NEH urban humanities program, Denise participated in the summer institute and became co-director at the Boston site in 1982. Over the years she has been a strong presence at the site, leading multicultural literature institutes, helping to recruit teachers of color, planning summer institutes, and conducting workshops and inservice.

From 1990 to 1994, she lived in Japan, teaching writing to Japanese college students at a branch of the City University of New York in Hiroshima.

She has been on the faculty at the University of Massachusetts at Boston since the mid-1980s, and in addition to her co-directorship at the Boston Writing Project, she is graduate program director for teacher education in the Graduate College of Education at the university. She also contributes her time and expertise as a member of the National Writing Project Task Force.

Denise is currently on leave, working long hours at home on her most important, time-consuming project yet — newborn son Luke Nathaniel, born last December 12. She plans to return to teaching and to the writing project in the fall, though in the meantime she still finds time to participate on her site’s advisory committee and the NWP Task Force. We’re grateful Denise took the time to give Voice Editor Roxanne Barber this telephone interview from her home outside Boston — an interview carefully planned to coincide with Luke’s afternoon nap.
How did you first become interested in writing, in teaching writing?
All my life I’ve always been interested in many voices singing about life through writing. My mother was a writer, and my aunt. I always wanted to be like them. I always loved to tell stories. I had just one brother and one cousin. Being the only girl I was often isolated from boy games, so I had imaginary friends. Sometimes I would write to them. One of my earliest memories was seeing my mother write — she used gold fountain pens and elegant paper. She made it look so beautiful. I thought, I can’t wait to become a writer. I wanted the implements, the pen, the stationery, the desk — it seemed like a special world she was in and I wanted to have that. Writing was always valued in my home, so by the time I got to school — and because I was a real Chatty Cathy — I never said I had nothing to write about. It was very rigorous, traditional, grammar-based writing instruction, but I had already found my voice with my writing at home. At home I could tell my own stories. So my schooling wasn’t a detriment to me.

Your first experience teaching was in the Boston Public Schools?
I was a Boston public school teacher — 6th to 8th grade language arts — in the mid-1970s. That was right at the end of the desegregation battle. I taught in the South end of Boston, an area that was integrated socioeconomically and racially. That was the time when a number of upper middle class families were taking their children out and sending them to private school. It was a direct result of busing. Now the schools are in a shambles. It’s a disgrace because Boston is manageable. We’ve not yet recovered from the battle in the seventies. I think that things are improving. It’s interesting — there are now TV advertisements trying to persuade people to move back into the city. I think as people begin to move back into the city and see the schools as a viable option, schools will change.

Tell us about your experience teaching writing in Japan.
I went to Japan in 1990 to teach advanced English and composition to predominantly Japanese students at CUNY Lehman Hiroshima College. All of them had taken at least six years of English, although it was a stilted, grammar-based English. It was an outstanding experience for me as an individual and as a teacher. One of my first memories in Japan is that of being struck by the Japanese translation of oodles of U.S. novels. I was in a book store and I saw all these American books in Japanese. It was just like the Barnes and Noble front desk. I felt terribly embarrassed by my own ignorance of Japanese novels. My husband and I were meeting lots of interesting Japanese people and I could not talk about literature because I didn’t know anything. Yet I had this wonderful education. None of my English professors had ever assigned a Japanese text. We had Chinese texts, West African, Caribbean, but I had never read anything Japanese. And look what they were reading about us! I had a lot of reading to do.
Did you grow as a teacher from your experience there?
I learned a lot as a teacher. I realized that the making of story was different there. Japanese students composed stories differently. There wasn’t that Aristotelian beginning, middle and end — the basic structure that I had always been taught. I had to become more flexible as a teacher to allow room for those voices that were very different from the way I was taught. When I started looking at my students’ writing, I thought, this really isn’t going anywhere. That’s a typical Western sort of reaction. I had to adjust my own response patterns as well as teach them the American way of composing.
That was a real challenge. It had a tremendous impact on my teaching in general. Now I’m a very different teacher.

**Which practices were particularly successful with your Japanese students?**
The writing process worked well with these students. *Response groups were very empowering and liberating.* These students came from a very traditional teacher-controlled, teacher-centered learning environment. Having the opportunity to hear other voices, to speak Japanese and English, to have noise in the classroom — that really worked for them. The exchange that we are accustomed to in U.S. classrooms, of students raising their hands, etc., having a dialogue — just was not there. I would have to call on a student by name if I wanted to have a response to something. Often times it would take several moments of silence because the student would think so deeply about the question. I, coming out of my Western frame, became anxious, saying something like “I’ll repeat the question again.” It made me think about the time in our own classrooms (in the U.S.) — the time for quiet and silence. I had to really temper my own response to a student who didn’t respond right away.

**As a culture we Americans tend to be much more impatient.**
We are. Yes, we are. And think about it — how does that shut out voices? Once I returned to the U.S., I found it so noisy in my university classroom. I started saying, "Wait, let’s stop and think about how we’re going to frame the response." That was particularly helpful for my African American students. But in Japan when I asked a question, often there would be a long moment of silence, then a student might turn to another and whisper — to check, does this make sense before I respond, because of the utmost respect for the teacher. I, on the other hand, was getting anxious, impatient, irritated — not only have I been waiting here for nanoseconds but now you’re going to talk to your peer? I had to really learn to honor true discourse in the classroom.

**What sort of change did you see in your Japanese students?**
I was able to see students achieve a level of comfort with a second language. I was able to see students feel comfortable with mistakes. I witnessed students appreciate the English language not just as a tool for business. Seeing the impact I had on them and their reverence for sensei (teacher) is something that I will always honor. I remember several years ago going back to Mrs. Reilly, my third grade teacher. I loved her a lot. I felt such awe and reverence for her. Then I was the recipient of that with my Japanese students. It was wonderful.
As a result of your experiences in Japan you’re writing a book?
The book I am writing is on Japanese literature. I studied the late Indo Shizako. He was a prolific writer and teacher. He really had a major impact on my reading skills. I learned that in Japan, reading was a source of socialization. I learned about the tatamei — the need to save face. There are certain things Japanese people would never talk about. And for them, reading a novel helps to objectify issues. Here, we use a text as a way to discuss issues; it really is a means. When I think about why we read here — for enjoyment, entertainment, to demonstrate ability, or for business — I learned to appreciate what’s not being said in Japanese texts.

I had never thought about a different way of designing stories until I was in Japan. Some of their great works still seem to go nowhere. It’s just their orientation to life — that basic of a difference. We’re an “in your face” society — make it bold, say what you mean. They’re just the opposite — the understatement is the real statement. It takes time and a lot of concentration to read Japanese literature. That’s because the purpose for reading in our culture is for you and I to socialize around the text. In their culture the text is the means for people to get to know one another. I learned a lot and did some studies in Japan around Japanese literature in translation and what some of the masters would recommend to non-Japanese to learn more about them. I have this terrific resource — which is what I want to get published. The book is on teaching about Japan through the investigation of Japanese literature in translation.

Have you seen a lot of change in the writing project over 15 years?
In 1982 I went to my first NWP directors meeting. I must say that I recall — maybe my vision was blurred — but I do believe I was one of the first African American directors in attendance. Also one of the few women. It’s not that I was uncomfortable, I just remember that’s the way it was. There have been major changes. In 1994, some 12 years later, I attended a directors meeting for the first time after being away in Japan for four years. Coming back and going to that meeting after four years and seeing the number of diverse people was really something. That was a marked change for me.

Has the conversation changed as a result of that diversity?
Yes, now there are conversations about diversity. There weren’t even any conversations in the past. Now we’re talking about race, culture, ethnicity, gender, as well as socioeconomic issues. Has the conversation changed? The conversation has begun. It’s an important step to have the people that represent various points of view present. It’s really exciting. And along with that is the tension — worrying, am I overstepping my boundaries, being offensive? So, we’re finding new avenues of communication. I find it refreshing.
Seeing the impact I had on them and their reverence for sensei (teacher) is something that I will always honor.