9:45 – 10:30 Concurrent Sessions A (Bourbon)

The goal of the National Writing Project is to improve the teaching of writing. Born of the literacy crisis which sparked the Newsweek article “Johnny Can’t Write,” for 40 years NWP has been a grassroots movement focused on that one simple goal. Our methods are simple and we focus first on teacher as writer because we believe, quite fiercely, that writers make better writing teachers. This is because the writing process is not something that nonwriters can really understand or teach effectively. We believe that everyone can become a writer and that transformation to writer should be our primary focus – rather that specific genres or writing tasks – because writers have the skills and confidence to tackle a variety of tasks but if you have not helped your students become writers with a growing toolbox then most will continue to struggle every time they are faced with a new task or genre or writing situation.

Writers are made through practice, study of other writers, constructive feedback, and physical and emotional support. There are no shortcuts, worksheets, or graphic organizers to make writers – writers are made through writing.

Reflect on your top goal or goals (keep it to three although really just one is best because we are looking for your bottom line here). What is the one takeaway you want your students to have – think big picture here.

For example, the class we will use as a model here is the First Year Seminar Class that I teach with another MWP leader, Jared Salyers, Devon, Lauren, and Megan work as teaching assistants with these classes. My class, From the Walking Dead to Superheroes, uses comic books and graphic novels as our focus. My bottom line goal is to push my students to think more critically. That goal fits very nicely with the student learner outcomes I’m expected to meet by MSU:

**1b)** Read college-level texts for comprehension.

**2d**) Articulate ethical consequences of decisions or actions.

**2e**) Apply knowledge and skills to new settings.

But I don’t want you to worry about the standards that someone else has set for your class. I want you to think about your bottom line – how would you complete this sentence: If my students learn nothing else from this class, I want them to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Making writers is not easy and its often messy, but it doesn’t have to be as much work as we sometimes make it. Before I developed the strategies I’m going to share with you, I would often contemplate leaving education altogether. Often times, right around midterm when I had stacks of papers to read and I knew another round was coming in days and there would be another after that. I would always ask myself what I was thinking – but the simple truth is that as I said before the only way to make writers is to have them write.

But here is the truth that will save your sanity – not all of that writing needs to be graded and not all of that writing needs to be read by you. The solution to this challenge – giving students the writing experience they need while not burying their teachers under an avalanche of papers to grade – is called low-stakes writing.

Peter Elbow is a strong proponent of low-stakes writing, he says:

**Why high stakes essay assignments?** If we ask students to articulate in clear writing what they are

studying we help ensure that they will in fact learn it. And without these carefully written papers,

we can’t give trustworthy final course grades--grades that reflect whether they actually understand

what we want them to understand. For if students take only short answer tests or machine graded

exams, they may often appear to have learned what we are teaching, when in fact they don’t really

understand. Besides, writing is a central skill for higher education, and students will not get good at

it if they write only for English or writing teachers.

**And low stakes writing?** The goal here is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to

increase how much students think about, understand, and learn what we are teaching. Low stakes

writing is usually more informal and tends to be ungraded or graded informally. You could

describe the goal this way: we can throw away the low stakes writing itself, but keep the neural

changes it produced--the new insights and understandings.

There are many benefits to low-stakes writing other than simply saving your sanity – low-stakes writing can build toward a larger paper or project – high-stakes writing – or some other goal but the process not only helps students develop as thinkers and writers it is active, engaged learning.

As we wrap up here, I want to talk about social capital. Creating a sense of community in your classroom is an important part of developing as writers. I’ve always believed in the power of the writing group and the writing workshop to grow writers, but I’ve also learned that as humans we learn better in social groups than we do individually. This idea plays very well with the idea of low-stakes writing because while we all know that collaborative high-stakes assignments can be a disaster learners will quite naturally collaborate and support each other if given the opportunity. I love to see what happens when I step back and watch my community teach each other – they learn more and they learn things I wouldn’t think to teach them – if I get out of the way. And I am not the only one who believes this:

“We are learning if we teach” – Seneca the Younger

“The one who does the teaching, does the learning” – Lev Vygotsky

Social capital is essentially the investment of your time, energy, and knowledge in a specific community and the benefits you derive from that investment. The organization’s purpose binds the community and focuses its energy, but it is social capital that fuels it. Social capital provides advantages to the individuals who possess it, but it also provides advantages to the organizations comprised of members with social capital.

But social capital doesn’t come naturally, you as community leader need to bring your class together as a group and give them a common purpose and goal – you need to give them a reason to support each other. Too often past experience has given students bad experiences working in groups and giving feedback – so you need to overcome that.

I have a community building assignment that I use with my students – we introduce ourselves using six word stories, share more information using me museums, and then deliberately share pieces of our lives over the first weeks of class. In the past this was a nightmare to grade – how do you grade community involvement? But my solution can easily be applied to grading low-stakes assignments as well – I crowdsourced by using Badges. I had students award the badges anonymously and I then awarded grades based on the number of badges that students received. I institute an appeal policy but for the past two semesters students have agreed that their grade was the right one for the community involvement. This semester we are going to use badges to assess student contributions to our class blog.

Now it is your turn – as a group award badges to the posters we’ve created here today

Bring blank paper and markers plus stickers for badges