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Writing is messy joy, local teachers learn

By: PHILIP K. IRELAND - Staff Writer

SAN MARCOS ---- Teachers who write make better writing teachers. That simple assumption drives the National Writing Project, a federally funded program founded in San Francisco in 1974 with a local chapter in San Marcos.

"It would be difficult to teach someone how to drive a car if you didn't know how drive yourself," said Mary Ann Smith, director of governmental relations and public affairs. Teaching writing without writing oneself is equally difficult, Smith said.

The National Writing Project offers teachers in every subject and grade from kindergarten to college a network of writing contacts, classes, ideas, resources and other supports, according to the project's Web site, www.nwp.org.

One of the writing project's key programs is the Summer Institute. Each summer for the past 31 years, teachers have convened in small groups to write, think about how they write and share ideas about writing.

The "thinking about writing" is an fundamental part of the writing project, Smith said.

"In experiencing writing, you rethink what kinds of supports help you write well," she said, "and therefore what kind of interventions will help your students write well."

Locally, the San Marcos Writing Project, founded in 2000 by professor Laurie Stowell at Cal State San Marcos, is one of 189 local chapters of that national program. Now in its fifth year, the San Marcos Writing Project is coming of age, said Stowell.

"We're just now getting people to take notice," Stowell said, who in early July won the 2005 Wang Family Excellence Award, recognizing outstanding faculty in the California State University system.

"It's taken us five years to build capacity," she continued. "We now have a pool of 120 good teachers, and we're paying close attention to what teachers need."

For the past three weeks, teachers from districts across North County have been meeting at the university from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. four days a week for the San Marcos Writing Project Summer Institute. The 20 days of writing and presenting and learning over five weeks earn each teacher-participant \$1,000, paid by a combination of state and federal grants.

Each morning is given to presentations on some aspect of teaching writing. Every participant must present on some writing topic once during the five-week institute.

On Wednesday, Tom Spain, a teacher at Fallbrook High School and a former North County Times copy editor, shared

ideas about how to create a student newspaper. Spain and his students have published a monthly school newspaper, now called the Tomahawk, for the past six years.

During his 90-minute presentation, Spain asked teachers to write a journalistic news account of a fairy tale. The room buzzed while the teams decided on a fairy tale and made plans, followed by a quiet few minutes of writing. Then these grown adults, teachers all, laughed aloud, shouted and whispered plot turns and dialogue as they tapped out their stories on laptops or scratched them out longhand.

The afternoons are given to writing, and the teacher-writers guard that writing time ferociously, Stowell said. They work on professional writing such as articles for submission to teaching magazines, journal writing, fiction and nonfiction stories, poetry ---- any kind of writing is fair game. The idea, Stowell and Smith agree, is to experience the struggle, the uncertainty, the discovery and joy that writing can bring.

"It sounded like a great way to feel more comfortable with my writing so I could help my kids with writing," said Cindy Huffstutter, a sixth-grade teacher at Ashley Falls School in Del Mar. Huffstutter was inspired by Stowell, who came to Ashley Falls to talk about the six common traits of good writing instruction. The presentation got Huffstutter and fifth-grade colleague Andrea Cannon curious about the Summer Institute.

"I want (my students) to be more excited about writing, to be lifelong writers instead of just writing to an assignment," Cannon said during a break in the sweltering fourth-floor university classroom Wednesday.

Both teachers will take the presentations they've seen and the ideas they've collected back to their school to present to their colleagues. The "teachers teaching teachers" idea is a core value of the writing project, Stowell said.

"They've really grown in impact out in the schools," said Jayne Marlink of the California Writing Project, the state affiliate. "It's common with a new site to invest so much in teachers that they forget that the goal is move that expertise out into schools. They've grown a number of new leadership teams in schools on the state's program improvement list."

In addition to the Summer Institute, the San Marcos Writing Project has hosted several "Young Writer Camps" during the summer months for local students from first to ninth grades. Teacher-participants of the past Summer Institutes gather several times each year to share ideas, renew friendships and share their writing.