One District's Story: MWP's Summer Institutes Raise Test Scores

By Casey Olsen and Lorrie Henrie-Koski

Casey's Story

I belong to a growing population of teachers who have never taught outside of No Child Left Behind's shadow. I entered Montana's teaching workforce in the fall of 2003, accepting a ninth/tenth grade language-arts position in Columbus. The following spring the state initiated its trial-run of the Montana Comprehensive Assessment System Criterion Reference Test (*MontCAS CRT* for short), designed to test Montana students' proficiency in regard to Montana content standards. Spring of 2005 brought the first "for-real" version of the CRT. By the end of that second year teaching, I was reconsidering my career choice.

It wasn't the test itself necessarily that was causing me to doubt my place in this profession; all my doubts seemed linked directly or indirectly to educational accountability and how it was being handled on local, state, and national levels. When the scores were lower than expected in 2004 and 2005, even taking into consideration that 2004 was the trial year—I felt the weight on my back, the one that had "If you don't do something to raise these scores, you may not get tenured," stamped all over it. I was eager to do what was expected of me, but didn't know where to begin.

Then the computerized practice tests came, up to four per school year, that really had nothing to do with the content or challenges posed by the Montana CRT because they were based on other states' standards. Additional tests meant additional pressure to perform for my students and for their teacher. Everywhere I turned for answers, I found confusion and empty remedies. The false hope came from seemingly confident voices around me: *What these kids need is more grammar*; *you need to improve their vocabulary,* and on and on. But as the 2004 and 2005 school years came and went, my students' abilities to diagram sentences and identify Latin roots did nothing to put a dent in the test scores. I was responsible for the entire ninth- and tenth-grade language arts curriculum, and I felt like a failing teacher.

I didn't choose a career in teaching to test students. I became a teacher to share a love of literacy, literature, and writing. At the end of my second year teaching, though, I wondered if that love could remain my number one priority. I didn't become a teacher to leave any children behind—far, far from it actually. This confusion and hopelessness nearly led me to become a statistic, one of the 50% of beginning teachers who quit the profession in the first five years according to a 2006 National Educators' Association study.

But in the summer of 2005, I attended a Montana Writing Project summer institute on The University of Montana campus in Missoula. The summer institute experience is an inquiry-based professional development opportunity—a professional development opportunity unlike any other. For four long weeks I toiled, asking myself tough questions about my students, my practices, and my identity as a teacher (with colleagues all around me asking the same tough questions). Together, we searched for answers, offered more questions and insights, and we grew as teachers and as people. By the end, those four long weeks had become something that I did not want to end, and truthfully they have not.

Since my summer institute experience in 2005, I have become a student of best literacy practices and a teacher-leader, sharing these strategies at conferences and professional development events across the state of Montana. More importantly in the years that followed my summer institute experience, my students found their voices. They composed. They wrote for the sake of writing and for the personal enjoyment writing practice provided them. And they wrote well. This was the true compensation for those intensive four weeks in Missoula. I finally felt like an effective teacher.

Coincidentally, Lorrie Henrie-Koski, a colleague of mine at Columbus Public Schools, experienced similar apprehension about the preliminary scores from the trial CRT and decided to attend the Missoula institute. Lorrie teaches seventh- and eighth-grade writing classes to all students in those grade levels at Columbus Middle School.

Lorrie's Story

My teaching career started in the late 1980's, when the whole language model of instruction crested. Eager to share my love of learning with students, I dived in head-first. My self-contained sixth grade classroom was a successful hub of activity and thinking as the lines separating reading, writing, and content-areas blurred.

After 10 years, I was assigned to teach seventh and eighth-grade language arts. Then, in 2002, our administration split our language arts into separate classes, and I was assigned the writing portion of the curriculum. Gathering sources for what my students should be able to write and how to instruct them became my focus. Toward the end of my first year as "the middle school writing teacher," my superintendent offered me an opportunity to attend an autumn training in the 6^{+1} Traits Model of Writing. Anxious to have more than a hit-and-miss approach to writing instruction, I accepted.

Ruth Culham, a former Montana English Teacher of the Year and one of the originators of the six traits concept, instructed my group in the foundation of the traits language, expectations, and scoring. Most impressive, though, was how she used literature to guide us through every part of her three-day presentation. Though Culham didn't use the term, her modeling was my first experience with reading like a writer. It made sense; it felt right.

After working with the traits in my middle school classes for a year and a half, I felt more organized and better able to score writing, but wasn't yet satisfied with my instruction. My students and I now spoke the same language, but I still felt a void. Testing had entered the picture, and suddenly statistics replaced passion in guiding my instruction. I struggled with feeling that I needed to teach to the test when I knew in my heart that a test shouldn't be my ultimate measurement of student success. I mistook my distaste for the emphasis put on testing as "teacher burn-out." I needed to be revitalized.

Early in 2004, my principal gave me a pamphlet for the Montana Writing Project. I had received a flyer a couple years previously, but didn't think I "qualified" for such an impressive-sounding experience. Two years as an official writing teacher and frustration with my sense of burn-out gave me courage to apply.

My acceptance letter was thrilling, yet intimidating. Four weeks away from home would be an eternity. I had two young children who spent the school year in day care. Shouldn't they have the summer with their mom? I had a husband whose work hours were 5:00 AM to 5:00 PM.. Would it be fair to impose more on his time? The daunting question that had kept me from applying earlier kept nagging me: would I be out of my league? I knew I had to accept the challenge, or "burnout" would soon claim another victim.

The stack of books on the desk that awaited me on my first day of the institute took my breath away. But that was nothing compared to the breathless moments I spent over the course of the next four weeks: moments of overwhelming emotion at the honesty in a peer's writing, moments of exhausted satisfaction from the intensity of my assignments, moments of elation with my own and others' successes.

Throughout the institute, our research and implementation of best practices reinforced within me the validity of much that I had intuitively done as a teacher in a self-contained classroom. I now had authorities to quote, demonstrations to share, and research to support the need for those practices in my middle school classroom. I felt alive again as a teacher.

Since my summer institute, best practices, content-area writing, and connecting writing and thinking have guided my instruction. These approaches help my students make connections—to each other, to the world, and, most importantly, to themselves. The dramatic increase in my students' CRT scores with the first test following my summer institute along with the consistency of high scores since then validates the effectiveness my MWP experience has had on my students.

Even more importantly, in my eyes, my experience with MWP has helped me fill not only the void in my own instruction, but also the writing void that other teachers are experiencing. As a teacher-consultant for MWP and a 6^{+1} Traits teacher-trainer, I've had many professional development opportunities to blend the strengths of both models. In sessions I conduct, teachers learn the language of 6^{+1} Traits as a communication tool, but we go far beyond the rubrics. We practice reading like a writer. We practice writing into the day, quick-writes, and responding to poetry. We practice ways to effectively build writing into content-areas without turning every assignment into a five-paragraph essay. We practice using picture books as springboards for broader thinking and writing.

A participant in a recent session summed up her experience most succinctly. She said she had come to the sessions expecting to learn how to teach her students to write, but, "…after doing some of these writing projects with my kids, I realized it's not something *I teach*; it's something *they do*." Interestingly, this concept is mirrored by Nancy Patterson in the Dec. 2009 issue of *Voices from the Middle*:

> "*Critical literacy isn't something we teach to students. It is something that we and our students engage in so that we all can experience what it means to be a literate person in an information-laden culture*."

It's this connection between reading, writing, and thinking that has challenged me to offer my students opportunities to challenge themselves to become the readers, writers, and thinkers they deserve to be.

By the Numbers (*by Casey Olsen*)

Besides the personal and professional benefits of attending an MWP summer institute, we both noticed an abrupt change in our students' performances on the Montana CRT. We weren't teaching to the test; in fact, we were doing the opposite. We were engaging students in writing practice, organizing our classrooms as writing workshops, teaching students to read like writers, and providing opportunities for them to become independent and self-motivated in their literacy.

And, we were raising our test scores.

Research by the National Writing Project (NWP) in 2008 compiled the work of nine independent studies, and all of them came to the same conclusion—"In nine independent studies, in every measurable attribute of writing, the improvement of students whose teachers participated in NWP professional development exceeded that of students whose teachers were not participants." These studies represented a vast variety of American culture with studies taking place in rural, urban and suburban areas, and "included students with diverse economic, language, racial, and ethnic backgrounds." Student writing was assessed in regards to content, structure, stance, sentence fluency, diction, conventions and was also given a holistic score. Every study showed that students who were taught by National Writing Project teacher-consultants scored higher than their peers who were not; moreover, every study showed this to be true in every category. The nine studies showed teacher-consultants have a significant impact in the areas of content, structure and stance.

Columbus Public Schools provides a compelling environment for case-study purposes. While there are an estimated 250 teacher-consultants of the Montana Writing Project currently teaching in the state, Columbus Schools remains unique with two teacher-consultants covering four consecutive grade-levels (seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth). Also, the class sizes in Columbus are small enough, with an average of 50 students per grade level, that every student in a particular grade level has the same teacher for language arts/writing instruction. By comparing scores from the eighth- and tenth-grade students at Columbus Public Schools with scores from those grade levels throughout the state—especially from schools of a similar size—this environment then allows for an interesting study of how Montana students taught by MWP teacher-consultants perform on the state-wide assessment in contrast to their peers.

A review of MontCAS CRT scores over the past five years from both eighth- and tenth-grade levels provided provocative insight. Specifically, Lorrie's eighth-grade students in the 2004 school year scored 64% proficient and above that spring (prior to her Montana Writing Project summer institute experience). This means that 64% of Columbus eighth-graders were at or above the state standards in their performance. After she attended the institute that summer, her 2005 eighth-grade students scored 89% proficient and above—a 25% increase over the previous year.

In my first year of teaching, my tenth-grade students scored 68% proficient and above on the 2004 assessment. I was teaching freshmen and sophomores at the time, so the students who took the assessment in 2005 were young people I had taught for two years in a row; they scored 61% proficient and above. That's when my panic alarms began sounding. After my MWP institute experience in the summer of 2005 though, my 2006 class scored 89% proficient and above. That put my post-institute gain at 24%.

Even more compelling, my sophomore class in 2007 was the same group of students Lorrie taught as eight-graders her first year back from the institute in 2005 (where they had scored 89% proficient and above). They were also my freshmen class my first year post-institute in 2006. This carry-over, a class of students who were taught three consecutive years in a language arts curriculum heavily influenced by MWP strategies, allowed our district to score 97% proficient and above at the tenth-grade level in 2007.

Since those 24% & 25% gains, our scores have maintained a remarkable consistency through the 2009 assessment year. From 2006 through 2009, Lorrie's eighth-grade classes have scored 94%, 95%, 99% and 98%; and the sophomores during the same period of time have scored 89%, 97%, 96% and 94% (these scores represent non-special-education students). Trends throughout the state show the majority of Montana schools exhibit up and down shifts as much as 15% on an annual basis. But in Columbus, especially over the past three years, we have seen minimal fluctuations. With the average class size in Columbus around 50 students, each student represents an approximate 2% increment of the overall score. With that in mind, scores of 96% and 97% are statistically equal at a Montana Class B school.

The "proficient and above" aspect of the MontCAS CRT is the focus of most districts in the state. It's the accountability "line in the sand"—the standard that gives Montana administrators sweaty palms each March. But there are other aspects of the assessment results that are equally intriguing. Columbus High School has worked diligently to place roughly 90% or more of special-education eligible students in the traditional classroom. The data from the state-wide testing has shown an interesting correlation with this effort. For instance, one comparable school at the Class B level has averaged 91% proficient and above with non-SPED eligible students at the sophomore level over the past three years, but their scores with all students combined over that same period of time (including students who are special-education eligible) average 77% proficient and above. This means that over a three-year period, this particular school had a 14% gap in performance when they included their special-education students.

Over that same three-year time period, Columbus has averaged 95.7% proficient and above with non-SPED eligible students, and the combined scores with special-education students included averages 92.3% proficient and above. This 3.4% gap has helped Columbus rank number one amongst Montana Class B public schools when sophomores of all sub-categories are combined, even ranking above nearly every private school of a comparable size in the state. Instruction that uses strategies gleaned from writing project summer institutes has given middle and high school students in Columbus the equivalent of a private reading and writing education in Montana.

The data indicates that teacher-consultants have a positive effect on special-education and Title-I eligible students—the students most likely to score below the proficiency line. Too many score-improving strategies out there focus only on getting a designated group of students over this designated line. But if we step back from the hype and anxiety, we see that the best strategy to tackle student performance and achievement is one that fosters growth in each and every student from where they are when they arrive in our classrooms to where they are when they leave (and beyond). Being an effective teacher for every student is why most of us got in this crazy profession to begin with, but the bureaucracy of it all gets in the way. The National Writing Project helped Lorrie and I get our passion and idealism back.

The data also shows a positive effect at the opposite end of the achievement spectrum. Over the past four years, an average of 61.8% of Columbus tenth-grade classes have scored advanced with all students combined, and the same score raised to 64.7% advanced over the past three years. All Columbus sophomores combined during the past three years have averaged 66% advanced and, during that same period of time, non-SPED students have averaged an impressive 68.7% advanced. Out of over 130 high school districts reporting scores to the Office of Public Instruction, Columbus ranks second in averages of the past three and four years when it comes to advanced scoring, and ranks first among Class B schools during the same time period in this area.

Data from the Montana Office of Public Instruction shows that, since attending Montana Writing Project summer institutes, Columbus Public Schools has:

- experienced a drastic increase in overall performance on the MontCAS CRT reading assessment (25% increase at eighth-level, 24% increase at tenth-grade level post-institute),
- achieved a remarkable consistency in our reading scores since 2005,
- consistently scored above 90% at the middle and high school level with all students combined,
- provided a learning environment where special-education eligible students consistently score proficient, even advanced on the state assessment,
- composed a very real application of individualized instruction, fostering growth in each and every student which has allowed two-thirds of our students to score in the advanced category over the past three years with all students combined—including many Title-I, SPED, and otherwise "at-risk" students.
- scored on par with private schools in the state, even out-performing them in some areas.
- experienced results that support having multiple teacher-consultants placed at a testing grade-level and in consecutive grade-levels.
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Best Literacy Practices: Strategies That Work (*by Lorrie Henrie-Koski*)

In Teaching Adolescent Writers, Kelly Gallagher lists writing wrongs that are taking place in our country. While his entire lists bears investigation, three issues applicable to this discussion are 1) Students are not doing enough writing; 2) Below-grade-level writers are asked

to write less than others instead of more than others; and 3) Teachers are doing too much of the work and students are not doing enough work.

An impressive body of research supports practices to right Gallagher's wrongs -- the practices Casey and I learned in our MWP institutes and utilize daily in our classrooms. In *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools,* Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde offer research-based recommendations on teaching writing, which include the following:

- building student ownership and responsibility for writing based on self-selection of topics, self-identification of goals for improvement, brief teacher-student conferences, and teaching students to review their own progress;
- class time spent on writing whole, original pieces through establishing real purposes for writing;
- instruction in and support for all stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing;
- teacher modeling of drafting, revising, and sharing as a fellow author and as demonstration of processes;
- grammar and mechanics instruction in context -- at the editing stage and as needed;
- writing for real audiences, publishing for the class and for wider communities
- creating a supportive setting for shared learning, exchanging student ideas, and collaborative small-group work;
- writing across the curriculum as a tool for learning;
- constructive and efficient evaluation that involves brief informal oral responses as students work; thorough grading of just a few student-selected, polished pieces; focus on a few errors at a time, and cumulative review of growth and self-evaluation and encouragement of risk-taking and self-evaluation.

Providing best practice experiences to students validates them as readers, thinkers, and writers. Daily writing opportunities may be as brief as a three-minute quick-write or as involved as a class-long writers workshop for revision. Implementing best literacy practices in the classroom doesn't require purchasing a program or devoting additional time to planning. It's the epitome of "teaching smarter, not harder." Math teachers can build writing into their days as easily as language arts teachers can -- the basic requirements are a true desire to be an effective teacher and a willingness to change what isn't effective. As Morgan and Saxton offer in Asking Better Questions:

> *"Effective teaching depends upon recognizing that effective learning takes place when the students are vigorous participants in what's going on. And for effective teaching and learning to occur, teachers must structure their teaching to invite and sustain that active participation. They need to provide experiences that get students thinking and feeling, get the adrenalin flowing, and generate in students a need for expression....Effective teaching requires more than knowing what you are going to teach, why you are teaching it, and to whom you are teaching it. It means recognizing that all students bring their feelings, as well as their minds and bodies, into the classroom."*

Since some educators may recoil at the mention of feelings, please keep in mind the spectrum to which this refers -- we all take our feelings everywhere with us. We all need to feel understood, appreciated, and accepted. At times, the deeper side -- the emotional side -- enters our classrooms as well. A recent article in NEA Today discusses how writing was used to help students and staff work through tragic events at schools around the country. We cannot ignore what is happening in our students' lives. Recognizing and valuing each student as an individual builds a sense of community that can be unique to writing classes. It also encourages students to engage in our classes.

Opportunities to write and share personal thoughts through journals, quick-writes, and even blogs build in students reflective critical thinking skills as well as an understanding of the structure of various types of writing. Given an opportunity to respond to a piece on genetic engineering, one student may take a persuasive stance supporting or refuting the need for the practice, while another may create a list of pros and cons to organize his thoughts. Either way, the writer must support an argument. Because there is no "right answer" to such writing opportunities, students learn to become risk-takers in their expression. They also learn that their opinions are valued.

Writing/sharing opportunities also offer teachers insight to student understanding of key concepts (*What is the importance of understanding DNA to finding a cure for cancer?),* processes (*Explain how photosynthesis works.),* and skills *(Explain how to divide a fraction by another fraction.)* Most teachers can relate to the feeling of having a stack of papers in front of them that clearly show the students didn't get the lesson -- that sinking feeling of "losing" a day because re-teaching is required. Often that sense of loss can be avoided by a glance at a student's notebook during class that reveals understanding or need for re-teaching, which can be done on the spot.

William Strong's Write for Insight: Empowering Content-Area Learning, Grades 6-12 cites the 2003 National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges report that calls for *doubling* writing time in U.S. classrooms. "This change alone will do more to improve writing performance than anything else states or local school leaders can do." This idea is attainable through the implementation of writing in content areas where writing is often neglected.

The Commission's report goes on to state: "*The research is crystal clear: schools that do well insist that students write every day...."* Therein, I believe, lies the secret of Columbus's success.

Ownership: Independent Literacy (*by Casey Olsen*)

In his book The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers, Sheridan Blau takes over twenty years of writing research and applies the concepts he learned to the reading process. If writing is a process, reading is too.

As a young graduate student teaching college-level freshmen English as a teacher's assistant, Blau noticed that he spent much more time than his students did reading and

researching the material he assigned in class. Often he would assign 3-5 poems for his students to read before the next class, and he would frequently find himself disappointed in the amount of dedication and follow-through that students put into these tasks. Frequently, his students wouldn't have read the pieces at all. "The difference between us, I realized (and promptly told them), lay largely if not entirely in our roles and in what we saw ourselves responsible for." Students don't often see themselves as being responsible for creating some type of meaning from what they read—they have teachers for that. As teachers, we often do much of the meaningful, important work (and learning) for them to help them understand. In doing this, Blau contends, we make them dependent on others for their literacy.

Blau kiddingly (but thoughtfully) says, "as long as teachers are teaching, students are not going to learn because the kind of experience teachers have that enables them to learn what they have to teach is the experience that students need to have, if they are to be the ones who learn. Given the way teaching and learning were conducted in most classrooms,…the experience of being taught was merely an experience of witnessing and possibly recording the teacher's learning, and not an experience of learning for oneself." I remember spending long hours, late into the night, as a young teacher preparing for the lesson I had scheduled for the following day; night after night after night. Honestly, I admit I avoided texts that I was not familiar with because I didn't feel I had enough knowledge or time to learn the material prior to the teaching—basically, I only taught books that I had been taught. Blau's research found these practices at every level of instruction.

At every grade-level and in every content-area, difficult texts exist for the students in any given classroom. Often, when encountering difficult texts, struggling readers internalize their problems with the text as a problem within themselves—they feel they aren't good enough, not smart enough, not sharp enough to comprehend. When good readers encounter difficult texts, Blau finds that they often re-read the piece again and again and again, needing desperately to glean some meaning from the reading, and subconsciously realizing that the problem is not within themselves—it's a problem with the text. The text is difficult and must be given added attention in order to comprehend it. These good readers enjoy the struggle, embrace their confusion and find their way out of it by asking questions, coming up with answers, and talking with other readers about their questions and answers. Through practice in the reading workshop, Blau has found that struggling readers can find success and independence by employing the strategies that good readers use.

Also important to the discussion is the role of confusion. Blau's work has given him insight into the mechanics behind a confused reader: "confusion often represents an advanced state of understanding. That's to say, the student who is confused is frequently the one who understands enough to see a problem, a problem that less perceptive students have not yet noticed or arrived at." With this concept in mind, Blau's findings support the idea that in classrooms where difficult texts are present, the chief function of that class "is not to present literature to students (as conventional teaching guides are likely to advise) in ways that will anticipate and prevent their confusion, but to welcome and even foster among readers the experience of confusion." Great confusion leads students to great questions; great questions lead students on journeys for great answers, and that is where the learning and literacy sprout from—a fertile ground of confusion.

By applying Blau's strategies and rationales throughout our educational systems, we do our noble and substantial part in creating independent, literate young human beings who can read, write, question, discuss and learn—and all for their own learning's sake.

In Reading, Writing, and Rising Up, Linda Christensen relates a story from her own childhood and education where during an open-house event at school, she shared a piece of her writing with her parents. "I remember holding my father's hand as he read my story hanging on the display wall outside Mrs. Martin's third-grade classroom on the night of Open House. I remember the sound of change jingling in Dad's pocket, his laughter as he called my mom over and read out loud the part where I'd named the cow 'Lena' after my mother and the chicken 'Walt' after my father. It was a moment of sweet joy for me when my two worlds of home and school bumped together in a harmony of reading, writing, and laughter." Christensen describes an area of writing education that an increasing number of researchers have found the benefit of—students writing about themselves, making personal connections in school writing assignments, intertwining their home lives and school lives and having the value of both respected by their teachers and peers.

My wife, a first grade teacher, tells me on our drive home of conversations she had with her young students that day and the stories they couldn't wait to tell. She mimics their frantic hand gestures and their sputtering speech as they struggle to get the words out, the urgency to share too much to contain. Tied tightly to our students' programmed need to acquire language and communicate is their need to communicate something about themselves, to intertwine their identities with the subject matter in the classroom. This frequently happens at the primary grade levels, and slowly but surely it seems to dwindle by the time students reach high school—perhaps due to neglect and disciplinary efforts ("No, you may not tell your story, we need to move on.").

What we miss out on when we disregard the intricately interwoven needs and programming of our young people is the powerful force that can propel students to be internally-driven readers and writers. By prompting students to write about a time they've ever felt discriminated against in preparation for a civil rights chapter in a government/history class, students make powerful connections to your subject-matter prior to the start of their reading, thus sparking engagement in the further lesson to come:

> *"I want you to think about times you've felt discriminated against and I want you to try to come up with a list of between 2 to 5 instances where this occurred—please take a moment now and make that list in your notebook (pause). Now I'd like you to share that list with your neighbor and briefly describe each instance to them (pause). I'd like you to look at your list again and think about which item on that list you had the most to say about—which one were you the most animated about or fixated on? Think about that for a moment and circle it. Good, now I'd like you to find an open page in your notebook and write about that instance in detail (pause). Now, if you*

would please, share that piece with your neighbor (pause). Would anyone like to share with the larger group?"

This scenario is adaptable to any grade-level or subject area. Simply consider what you're trying to get across with your content, get students to connect themselves and their stories to it with writing, and reap the benefits of engaged students throughout the lesson. This need to feel connected personally to the subject-matter has been observed in applications throughout the K-12 spectrum, extending into undergraduate studies, graduate studies and beyond.

In my own experimentation with this technique, I've expanded the notion that I can get my students to engage in any topic if I first allow them to make personal connections to it by considering the genre possibilities through which they might try to respond. Often in school, we as teachers choose the genres for student response. This goes against the grain of the real writing world, in that real writers write out of a need to express themselves on a given topic, a purpose, and then personally affix the genre that will allow them to accomplish that purpose. On the other hand, we need students to experience a broad range of genre throughout their education.

To compromise these two opposing needs, I've turned to Katie Wood Ray and her comprehensive series of books on best practices, specifically geared for the primary grade levels, and yet I've found her strategies apply directly to my high school classroom and the graduate-level summer institutes I lead. In her book Wondrous Words, Ray describes a process that allows students to become masters of their own literacy through observation and experimentation. She chooses models of genres and has students practice this process, discussing their findings with those around them. Her process is as follows:

The Five Parts to Reading Like A Writer

1. ***Notice*** *something about the craft of the text.*
2. ***Talk*** *about it and* ***make a theory*** *about why a writer might use this craft or technique.*
3. *Give the craft/technique a* ***name****.*
4. ***Think*** *of other texts you know. Have you seen this craft before?*
5. *Try and* ***envision*** *using this crafting in your own writing.*

In my interactions with this technique, I've found that it functions as an applicable development of the scientific method, asking students to notice (make observations), talk and make theories (hypotheses), etc. Directly though, it serves as a way for students to explore a given text at a masterful depth, one at which they can begin to break down the construct of a written piece into tangible approaches to duplicate and experiment with form, content, and voice.

Ray's book Study Driven takes this approach into the full-parameters of a school year, using this method of reading like a writer as the basis for all classroom pursuits. The results are highly effective at all grade-levels. My learnings and research with these four books have lead me to use Ray's method above to allow students to study writing genres through which their applications of the method result in memoir pieces about themselves and their home lives. Their need to express this personal connection to subject matter propels their need to learn more and more about the possibilities offered them through the various genres we study.

If we create classrooms where students readily, willingly, and confidently take on *difficult texts*, then foster that confidence, encouraging students to make *noticings* and create opportunities for them to *talk* about what they noticed—*experiment* with what they noticed—then we are creating independent, literate young people. Katie Wood Ray's research is heavily influenced by her work with her primary-grade students, Christensen's with her high school students and Blau's with his college students. Developing independently literate young people is a worthy goal for every teacher in every content-area at every grade level. With those skills our students become the masters of their own destinies.

Tackling the Test: Studying Assessments as a Genre (*by Casey Olsen*)

Montana Writing Project engages teachers in best literacy practices that, when applied with vigor in classrooms, empower students to be active, independent and self-accountable. In doing so, students become skilled in literate processes, like those mentioned previously in the descriptions of research conducted by Katie Wood Ray and Sheridan Blau. These processes allow students to compose in any genre they encounter through observations and noticings they make while reading that particular genre. Through repeated practice and a comfortable, natural delivery in the teaching, students naturally approach each learning opportunity ready to notice—and ready to be aware.

In my sophomore English classes, we study a variety of genres that include poetry, plays, short stories, research essays, and literary analysis essays. Each genre we interact with is tackled through the same process: we read model pieces from that particular genre (including model pieces created by previous students whom the current students would be familiar with, perhaps conducting multiple readings if it is a particularly difficult text), and students make observations and noticings during those readings, and then they share and discuss with each other what they noticed in regard to the structure and organization of the genre, the writer's technique, and the length, depth and detail of the piece.

After my students share and discuss their noticings, I have them report back to the larger class what each group found. The points of observation they share become the parameters of the genre we're studying, and I record each point for the students on the board. We've reversed roles—the teacher is taking the notes and the students are teaching—and the bulleted list they create becomes the rubric by which their own experiments into this particular genre are assessed.

As Lorrie and I have said before, this is not a "teach-to-the-test" strategy. But, interestingly enough, tests are a genre too…with a whole slough of sub-genres. Linda Christensen says, "While critical teachers might stand back and say we don't want to have anything to do with tests, we can't just go on with business as usual. The question for anyone who cares about kids is: How do we retain our critical stance on assessments while preparing students for them? Can we 'teach the tests' without compromising what we know to be true about teaching and learning?" Teaching to the test mandates come from individuals who either consciously or subliminally view the test as the comprehensive value of each student's education. But there are alternatives to this perspective, and the alternatives are not education without accountability. The Montana Writing Project's summer institute experience offers professional development that brings assessment, content, curriculum and best practices under

the larger umbrella of literacy. When students view tests as a genre, they're able to study them, critique them and master them. Testing then is not the focus, but a piece of a larger literate whole.

Christensen, a Language Arts Coordinator and English teacher for Portland (OR) Public Schools, describes her approach to critically analyzing tests as a genre on page 113 of Reading, Writing and Rising Up:

> *"But we did find a way to demystify the tests and use our knowledge to teach others about our outrage. I asked students to analyze each of the verbal sections of the SATs. We examined the instructions, the language, the 'objectives' of each section. We looked at how the language and culture of the SATs reflected the world of upper class society. After examining each section and taking the tests a few times, I asked students to construct their own tests using the culture, content and vocabulary of Jefferson High School."*

Christensen's students worked in small groups to write vocabulary questions based on noticings they had made while reviewing released items from the SAT. After collecting their questions together, they called their test the "JAT"—or the "Jefferson Achievement Test"—and her students administered this test to a group of pre-service teachers at a local college. This interaction with future educators allowed the students to become the teachers, demonstrating how tests are often regionally and culturally biased and written from an upper-middle class, Caucasian point of view. Christensen adds, "Asking students to become investigators prior to exam time can help put the tests in a social context, but more than that, it diminishes the size of their opponent." Critical literacy empowers students, allowing them to feel in control in a testing situation.

The techniques we've discussed here, used throughout the year to decode and demystify genres of literature and ultimately allow students to experiment in those genres themselves, work just as well when applied to the MontCAS released items, available through the Montana Office of Public Instruction. These files, accessible online, include reading passages, multiple choice questions, constructed-response questions, and scored writing samples from previous years' tests.

In a series of class periods leading up to test day, Lorrie and I distribute portions of the released items and ask our students to read through them like writers, make noticings, and discuss what they notice with their peers. We allow our students to determine what is being expected of them from these questions, what strategies they might employ to be successful, and where they have the freedom to express individual thought in the constructed responses. Then, we prompt them with an example text and question, allowing them to experiment with this genre in the same way they've experimented all year long in other genres. The results, outlined earlier, speak for themselves.

The Bigger Picture (*by Casey Olsen*)

The results, resources and opportunities Lorrie and I have discussed in this article have shaped our professional lives and benefited our students beyond the MontCAS immeasurably. A legacy study conducted by a team from NWP found that teacher-consultants were also more likely to stay in the teaching field, stating in its conclusion that "NWP appears to provide a lasting infrastructure for improving the teaching of writing and inculcating leadership among teachers. NWP offers those teachers new roles, helps them develop as leaders, and provides an established professional community where they can return for ongoing support, learning, and renewal." This has definitely been true for me.

The Columbus administration was so pleased with the initial productivity and positive results we experienced that Columbus Public Schools hosted an MWP satellite summer institute in 2008, and we now have six teacher-consultants working within the district. Laurel Public Schools hosted one the following year (giving them eleven teacher-consultants) and has graciously agreed to host again in the summer of 2010, July 12th through the 30th. Browning will also host a summer institute during those dates, and Missoula will host the four-week institute (as it has every year since 1978) from June 14th through July 9th. For information or an application, contact us at mwp@umontana.edu.

The statistics described earlier suggest that empowering students and studying tests as a genre have positive effects on student performance, both individually and across a large group over an extended period of time. They also support earlier research that students of writing project teacher-consultants score higher than students of colleagues who have yet to experience a summer institute.

Problems with the test persist though.

Teaching to the test limits students' experiences and development of inter- and intrapersonal skills, and Linda Christensen's work shows us that tests lose viability if they're not culturally and regionally relevant to the students who are taking them. There is evidence of this in the schools with a majority of their enrollment comprised of Native American students struggling with MontCAS scores in multiple categories. While an effort has been made by Measured Progress to include testing content that is culturally and regionally relevant to Montana, the tribal nations residing in the state are sovereign entities with their own cultures and regional vocabularies. As stated earlier, the majority of standardized tests are written (however unintentionally) from an upper-middle class, Caucasian perspective—and often contain content and questions culturally and regionally relevant to the area or state the test was created in. Just as my rural Montana students would struggle greatly with questions relevant to New England culture—yachts, crew teams, deep-sea fishing, etc.—we cannot expect Native students to succeed with tests they do not find themselves connected to.

The worst part of the situation is that these schools who are not making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) are being placed on scripted curriculums where teachers lose the ability to incorporate best practices. Critical thinking skills, essential to success in life, are often sacrificed for strategies claiming to offer success on a test. These commercialized scripted curriculums imposed on "failing" schools with the intention of raising scores have the opposite effect and are counter-productive as evidenced by the AYP results available through Montana's Office of

Public Instruction. There are great teachers and great young people all across Montana reservations, but the system is working against them. Teachers and students in these schools need more opportunities to read, write and discuss. Montana Writing Project is working to level the playing field through critical literacy.

Want to find the same success for your students? … Here's how.

Teachers:

- Try the techniques and/or read the texts mentioned in this article,
- Attend a Montana Writing Project professional conference workshop,
- Attend a Montana Writing Project summer institute experience,
- Encourage colleagues to attend an institute with you.

Administrators:

- Support, sponsor and encourage teachers (even multiple teachers) interested in attending a summer institute experience,
- Allow sponsored teachers to make salary-lane changes from their summer institute experience (the results are well worth the investment),
- Contact Montana Writing Project teacher-consultants for professional development in-services at mwp@umontana.edu,
- Encourage book-study groups in your buildings centered around texts mentioned in our bibliography.
- Consider hosting a satellite summer institute on your campus in order to reach an optimal number of teachers—contact MWP to learn how.

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