

Final Report

Professional Development Grant: Conference on Writing, Teaching, and
Technology, K-College

University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of English
In collaboration with
University of Massachusetts Boston
University of Massachusetts Lowell
Western Massachusetts Writing Project
Massachusetts Writing Project

With the support of this grant and additional funding from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the New England Association of Teachers of English, and the Massachusetts Writing Project, the project planning team organized a regional conference of teachers of English from elementary through tertiary education, held at UMA on April 7th and 8th, 2006.

As identified in the proposal, the specific goals of the conference were to

- disseminate best practices to prompt thinking about new ways of teaching students: specifically, the conference will highlight effective uses of a variety of existing and emerging technology tools that foster writing, learning, and teaching writing as interpersonal, social activities;
- reflect on the impact of new technologies on writing, teaching, and learning to write;
- identify theoretical and empirical questions that need to be pursued by further research: e.g., changing conceptions of writing and implications for teaching and assessment; applications of specific programs; and
- encourage further conversations and collaboration amongst faculty across campuses of the University and across levels of education, from elementary through tertiary.

We believe we succeeded in realizing these goals as evidenced by the project deliverables: the Conference itself and the conference website at <http://www.umass.edu/english/WTTConf.htm>.

Conference

As the conference program indicates (<http://www.umass.edu/english/WTTConf.htm>), we succeeded in attracting participants representing elementary through college, offering a wide range of presentations that included classroom applications, approaches to assessment, theoretical and speculative considerations of how new technologies are impacting teaching and conceptions of writing and reading. We had solicited

proposals via the website, mailing to various listservs, and postal mailings of a conference post card, poster, and call for proposals.

Having planned the program, we again disseminated information on the conference to invite others to attend. We used the website again, posting the conference program; listservs and blogs; and a more limited postal mailing.

Our goal was to have 100 attendees, which we nearly reached, having 91 participants from elementary through college teaching. Approximately 70% attended both days. Most of the K-12 teachers came from western and central Massachusetts, although one came from a school in Tasmania; college teachers ranged from Massachusetts' public and private institutions (UMA, UMB, UML, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, MIT), to such other schools as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, University of New Hampshire, Ball State (Muncie, IN), Louisiana State University.

In addition to the formal sessions, the conference schedule also included ample opportunities for informal exchange, particularly a reception at the end of the first day, continental breakfast on the second day, and a closing luncheon.

Evaluations from participants were very positive. Participants' mean rating of the conference overall was 4.6 on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=not successful at all and 5= very successful. The mean rating for an item asking to what degree the conference gave people new ideas for teaching, the mean rating was 4.4, on a similar 1 to 5 scale where 5=very much so. The mean rating for the degree to which the conference furthered thinking about the impact of technology on writing, teaching, and learning was 4.8. Pointing to what they found most valuable, many cited networking and post-session conversations. One wrote, "collaborating, sharing enthusiasm. . . I left feeling energized!" Many praised specific sessions, one writing "the sessions were outstanding—informative, inclusive, and compelling." Others pointed to Charlie Moran's closing speech (<http://people.umass.edu/cmoran/cmhome/conferencetalk.pdf>).

Commenting on what was least valuable, a couple noted two specific sessions; a couple pointed to insufficient signs giving directions; and a few wrote "nothing."

Website.

The conference website is still accessible. It includes the conference program with abstracts of papers, contact information for participants who wished to be listed, related resources provided by participants, and a wiki to continue conversations from the conference. In the last sixty days, there were more than 350 visitors to the Wiki page, but hardly any postings. It has now been locked, thus closing it off for any other comments.

Final Comments.

For those of us on the planning committee, the conference underscored our belief in the value of small conferences that allow plenty of room for exchange

among participants, both in sessions and beyond them. It also underscored the value of conferences that bring together teachers from across teaching levels, elementary through college around issues that impact all of us. We are much appreciative of the support from the President's Office that, in part, supported the conference.

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