



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: How the Pros Do It: Creative Writing Instruction

Name: Paul Deagle

Other Team Members:

Program: Rural School and Community Trust Program

Trip Dates: 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001

Location Visited: Humber School for Writers, Toronto, Ontario

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 02

Project Summary: In an effort to revitalize myself both personally and professionally as a secondary English teacher, I began writing a novel back in August, 2006, and it has proved to be one of the best decisions of my life. I began slowly and carefully, never having attempted a lengthy book before, and within a few months I had about a hundred pages of draft and could conceptualize the full scope of my story. I continued working on my own for three years and completed the draft and immediately began investigating how to publish. I came across the Humber School for Writers website while on-line researching literary agents and was immediately intrigued. Fortuitously, an educational consultant advising my high school told me about Fund for Teachers, and I immediately applied, anticipating acceptance of my 15 page manuscript into the Humber School for Writers Summer Program. Within a month, both admission into the program and funding to attend were sitting on my writing table at home.

I was interested in the Humber School for Writers Summer Program chiefly because I believed their pragmatic "coaching" of emerging writers would best advise me as to what I should do next with my completed draft. As an English teacher, I was also fascinated by the instructional methods I might observe and how I might emulate these methods in my own classes. In the summer workshop, I spent five mornings in class with a small group of students, reading and commenting on the work of the others under the guidance of Mr. MacLeod, Canada's greatest living writer and perhaps the definitive master of the short story form in English. I had several short, private meetings with Mr. MacLeod, as well, which proved extremely beneficial given that he is also a retired Professor Emeritus in Creative Writing from the University of Windsor. Outside of our small class, I attended talks given by former students who had published in the previous year and other high-profile publishing professionals. Based on the merit of my manuscript, I also met privately with professional editors and agents and came away from these meetings understanding all that is left for me to accomplish in order to become a published writer.

For me, The Humber School for Writers Summer Program lived up to its self-promotion as "rocket fuel for the literary life." Writing is by far the loneliest vocation so the experience of conferencing with other emerging writers was both cordial and affirming in the deepest sense.

Career Impact: My experience at Humber completely reconfigured everything I understood about professional writing, as well as the teaching of creative writing. As an aspiring, first-time novelist, I never expected my writing would receive such high praise and encouragement. Years of advanced training in undergraduate and graduate literary analysis rendered me incapable of perceiving, let alone assessing my own merits as a story-teller. My experience at Humber has improved my self-confidence, sharpened my determination by showing me I do have the instincts needed to write effectively. As a secondary teacher of writing for twenty-four years, I expected advanced and detailed pedagogical approaches at Humber and was stunned by the downright simple, pragmatic teaching approaches being used by all of the writing mentors. I came away with an entirely new appreciation for simplicity in teaching. Deciding what to recommend to a writer, whether it be target exercises to improve technical awareness and control, or more generalized direction to further amplify tone and voice, is secondary to always listening with an open-heart and reacting with honesty and a sincere desire to encourage and to help.

Classroom/Community Impact: Because everything I thought I understood about the teaching of creative writing has been turned on its head, I am only just beginning to weigh all of the ramifications for my teaching creative writing. I expected to return to my classes with a newly recommended text book, new, more effective focus exercises that would "blanket" appropriate instruction for all of my students, and a clearer understanding of the inner workings of the publishing industry. Well, I now have a deep distrust for textbook-centered creative writing instruction, I am leery of instruction too reliant upon focus exercises, and really no clearer understanding of how the publishing industry works that I didn't learn on my own by simply surfing credible web sites. Based on my own positive experiences, I believe that Humber's manuscript-centered approach is the most beneficial for emerging writers, though it poses a whole new set of challenges for my secondary teaching. My teaching used to begin with blank pages on students' desks, but manuscript-centered instruction requires students already have text, which implies that a much different developmental process needs to evolve district-wide before high school.

Open Response: Emerging Authors K-12 Program -- Having witnessed professional creative writing instruction, I filtered everything from my Humber experience through this single question: "How can I prepare students K-12 to be accepted into the Humber School for Writers Summer Program after high school?" As I design a district-wide "Emerging Authors" program, I have these guidelines:

- * Creative writing instruction should begin with a student's first experiences with literacy in kindergarten.
- * Early elementary students should be taught to think of themselves as writers of all genres, and then explore to prove each to be true.
- * Full choice in what and when to write should belong to late elementary students who've begun to find their own voice in a particular genre.
- * All middle school and high school instruction should be manuscript-centered, with the instructor offering little more than a reader's response.
- * All manuscript revisions must be conceptualized, initiated and carried through by students; all responsibility for growth is with the writer.
- * Emerging writers should spend as much time reading and discussing other authors as they do writing; all writing begins in reading.

Quote: Artistic Director, Antanas Sileika, calls the Summer Writing Workshop "rocket fuel for the literary life."

Photos:



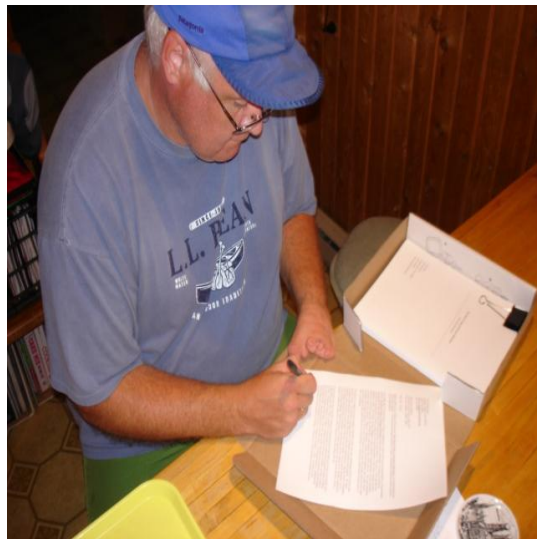
Myself and Alistair MacLeod



Closeup of Myself and Alistair MacLeod



Alistair MacLeod and My Writing Class



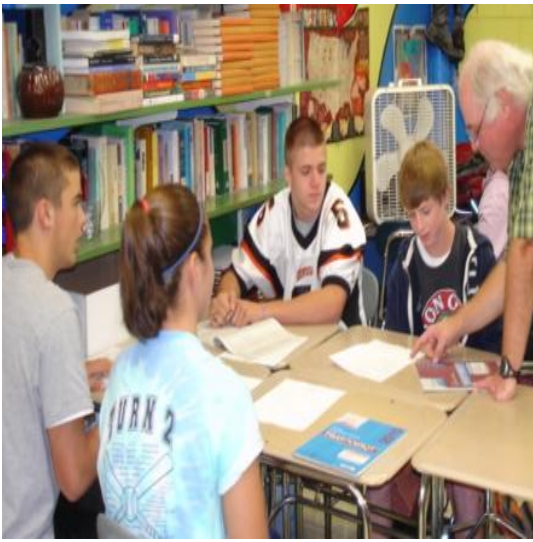
Sending In My Manuscript



Early Laptop Writing on the Deck, 2006



Myself and My Sophomores



Writing Workshop in the Classroom



More Writing in the Classroom