

# BLACKWATER REFLECTIONS

*Blackwater Writing Project*  
Dept. of English, Valdosta State University  
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## Feature Article - Lindsi Elliott

Diana Chartier, Quitman Elementary



This month we feature Lindsi Elliott, a native of Valdosta, growing up and attending the schools in which she would later teach.

I met Lindsi during the 2006 Invitational Summer Institute (ISI). At that time, Lindsi was teaching seventh grade at Valdosta Middle School. She had also been nominated by the students as teacher of the month and won that recognition. Both of us were accepted into the ISI as a part of our master's programs and were unaware of how the way we looked at writing and teaching would change.

During the ISI, Lindsi demonstrated many skills and qualities beneficial to Blackwater Writing Project (BWP). Donna Sewell invited Lindsi to serve as co-director of BWP. Her responsibilities included planning the 2007 Invitational Summer Institute, supporting BWP programs, and envisioning new directions. In that capacity, she attended the Rural Sites Network conference and the New Site Leadership Institute, which allowed her to see BWP as a part of a national program supporting teacher quality. In October 2006, Lindsi took her teaching demonstration, "Stronger Adjectives through Writing," and presented it at the Wiregrass Literature and Literacy Festival Festival at Valdosta State University.

Continuing in her capacity as co-director, Lindsi facilitated the 2008 ISI along with Donna Sewell and the new co-director, Rebecca Elmore. In July 2008, she assisted with a Teacher Quality Grant, written by Anne Marie Smith in the Dewar College of Education that allowed BWP to provide professional development for Valdosta City School teachers. This grant focused on ways to incorporate more expository and persuasive writing in the eighth-grade curriculum.

As the 2008 ISI ended, Lindsi accepted a new position. No longer working outside the home, Lindsi is excited to work with Carlyn Maddox as co-director of

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## Member Updates

**Amy Brosemer** is moving from second grade to 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade EIP at Dewar Elementary School.

**Diana Chartier** has her Gifted Endorsement.

**Kimberly Dixon**, voted Teacher of the Year at North Brooks and then received System Teacher of the Year.

**Victoria English**, May 3, 2008 graduated with her Masters of Art in English Rhetoric and Composition with an ESOL endorsement. The title of her thesis was "Teaching Academic ESL Composition to Saudi Students: The Saudi-US Education Mission Post 9/11."

**Jeremy D. Tucker**, 2008 Fellow, moved from MacIntyre Park Middle School to Thomasville High School

**Pam Rutledge Wright**, 1999 Fellow, has been hired at North Georgia College and State University as an Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary British Literature.

[Send us your news and updates!](#)

If you would like to write a feature, please contact [Diana Chartier](#).

professional development, a definite connection to the recent grant. BWP has been working to place two people in each leadership position, preferring a team approach to leadership and minimizing difficulties with leadership transition. Lindsy will also serve as co-director for the 2009 ISI, but then someone else will move into that position.

As part of the professional development team, Carlyn Maddox is presently creating a needs survey to show what teachers and schools believe will most help them in their efforts to increase teacher and student writing. With results in hand, Lindsy and Carlyn with the help of Amy Brosemer and Jeremy Tucker will research professional development opportunities and devise a plan to market BWP to local school systems as providers of professional development.

Lindsy Elliott's long-term participation with Blackwater Writing project includes many goals. At this time, they include bringing in a wider spectrum of participants to the Invitational Summer Institute and changing views on the strategies currently used to teach writing. Lindsy also wants to reach out to past participants to show how teachers are actually using the research and strategies presented.

Lindsy is looking forward to the challenges ahead and is enjoying the ability to remain within the realm of teaching while on a maternal sabbatical.

WOW! This issue is exploding with great submissions and new sections. As always the Summer Institute asked a fellow to write a review of the ISI. This year's review is composed and submitted by

**Ricardo Ipinia, Valdosta High School**

### The 2008 Invitational Summer Institute

I ran into a friend of mine at a recent gathering, and after the usual greetings she wondered what had happened to me, why neither she nor anyone else in my circle of friends had seen me lately. She knew I was on vacation but was nowhere to be found.

"I have been participating in Blackwater Writing Project's Invitational Summer Institute," I replied.

She appeared impressed and puzzled, but politely smiled. "What kind of class is it?" she asked.

"It's like no other class I have ever experienced before. At its core there is its basic premise of how to effectively incorporate writing into the curriculum regardless of your specific discipline. This is done not through long, boring lectures in which the instructor drones on about statistics, research, and teaching standards, but in a most ingenious way."

"How?" she asked.

"By having each participant present a teaching demonstration based on research supporting the reasoning behind the methodology used in the lesson. The 'teaching demo' as it was affectionately known also had to show a correlation to the teaching standards set by the state. Last but not least the demo had to be activity oriented. No long lectures. Activity, activity, activity! Thus, the participants, who were mostly teachers, were teaching teachers. I think this is a clever way to demonstrate how teachers can easily remain current, show a relationship to the teaching standards in their teaching and planning, and keep students engaged and on task. The demos were as varied as the group itself. We went from writing haikus to building rockets, to acting, to dissecting sheep's eyes . . ."

"Gross!"

"Not really, just different. And that was the point. Variety and activity nurtured interest. Interest evolved into engagement, and engagement built a strong and participatory learning community."

"Teachers teaching teachers. Sounds odd but interesting," she commented.

"Not only was it interesting but it was down right fun!"

"Fun? With words like institute, writing, and project in its name it's hard to believe that you had fun."

"It was fun because all activities were designed to quickly build a sense of community among participants, and it all began with breakfast. Each participant was responsible for three treats: breakfast on your assigned day, a daily log on your assigned day, and at the end of the week different groups were also responsible for providing lunch. Breakfast was always aromatic, delectable, and satisfying, usually consisting of a hot breakfast casserole, accompanied by fresh fruits, muffins, yogurt, and drinks. The daily log was basically a summary of the previous day's events as witnessed by the keeper of the log. As mundane as that may sound it was always one of the highlights of the morning. The presentation of the log took on many shapes. There were games, videos, poems, songs, and always plenty of hilarity. What I have failed to mention earlier was that at the heart of hilarity was the daily writing prompt. Each day we were presented with a free-writing topic and then given a half an hour to write on it. When time was called, our writings were shared on a voluntary basis. (Continued p. 5)

## Book Review

An exciting addition to our newsletters is the addition of member-submitted book reviews. Do you have a favorite professional book you would like to see included? Submit reviews through [Donna Sewell](#) or [Diana Chartier](#)

Jeremy Tucker, Thomasville High School

Reynolds, Marilyn. *I Won't Read and You Can't Make Me*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.

How many times have I read a professional book or article only to throw it down in disgust, asking myself why I should bother? Many times such “great works” merely toot the horn of the writer. Maybe they attempt to pass along keen information designed to increase the reader’s overall ability and capacity to function in their field, but do they have to do it in such a boring manner? If I wanted to read stereo instructions, trust me, I’d go buy my own stereo and wade through the instructional sludge. Books designed to increase an individual’s functionality should also seek to reach such individuals in a way that can be understood and enjoyed.

Reynolds took this lesson to heart. A 130-page book “assigned” to me (as part of the Invitational Summer Institute) has never taken less than a week to read; usually it takes even longer. I ate Reynolds’ book with gusto. In just two short days I finished it. I couldn’t put it down and enjoyed every iota of information. Finally, an academic read that sought me out, just as a drowning man will seek out anything that could keep him above the waves: rafts, floats, wood, other people.

Reynolds’ way of writing kept my attention. I never once found myself wondering what was for dinner, what level I would reach next on World of Warcraft, or how nice my wife smelled today. Instead, I imagined how Reynolds’ ideas could work in my own classroom. Would my students find the pleasure in reading that her students did? Would they be up to the reading journals, daily journals, reader recommendation cards, and self-awareness reports that her students used to generate an avid and (Reynolds’ main point) a life-long desire to read, to learn and grow as they dined on the bookshelf buffet before them? How could I incorporate something of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time into my own classrooms? Would the school district ever let me open an SSR class where all we did was read, talk, and write? Do you see the fire lit under my proverbial backside? Maybe not, but I suddenly feel the need for some SPF 80.

Reynolds constantly uses techniques that endear her to her readers and brings them “into the fold.” Normally, such intellectual reading seeks to tell its readers, in the most nasally, stuck-up, dry-toast way imaginable, “This is what I found, and this is how you can too! This is how you apply my estimable, awarded, celebrated tools for education!” Reynolds instead teaches her audience with real-life experiences and letters. Maybe I’m not as well-read academically as I should be, but I do devour books for pleasure, and I know what works for me and what doesn’t. Being able to connect with other readers and real-life experiences will always keep my interest. Reynolds kept my interest.

Everyday I rack my brains, trying to find some way to increase my own students’ interest in escaping to a good book and watching a movie inside their own head. Yes, I can share with them my own excitement when picking up, and falling into, a good book, but that will only carry me so far. Some of my students would rather fail a class than pick up a book. To quote the highly affable Eric Cartmanas from *South Park*, “How do I reach deese kids!?”

Reynolds proposes a simple solution: try a variety of books, and notebooks, to show them that something different should be tried before rejecting reading. I’ve done the Bellringer weekly grade thing, in which students write about one topic (usually themselves) for five minutes each day. That didn’t go over so well—some students failed my class just because they refused to write about themselves for five minutes maybe only three times a week . . . big shocker there. Maybe I need to try something different.

I loved journals when I was in school. I never enjoyed being locked into one single topic though. Maybe I don’t want to write about the best doughnut I ever had. Maybe instead I’d rather write about that time Sparky dove over the bridge in order to catch the handkerchief that flew off of his neck (Sparky loved that handkerchief). Giving a few topics to prompt writing would certainly be a step up. I would love to get to know my students better; I see some of them more than their own parents do. I want to know about their favorite shoe air freshener and about the time they went fishing and came home with a midget in a cowboy hat. Reynolds achieves this with her daily journal logs as part of SSR, and I think I’ll incorporate such logs too. They might not work, but at least it’s another notch in my well-worn “Inspired Teacher” belt.

Finally, Reynolds’ entire book subject, getting reluctant readers to read, ironically helps me as its topics, ideas, and stories are intended to help me help my kids. Reynolds offers a plethora of ideas in order to generate student interest in reading.

(continued p.4)

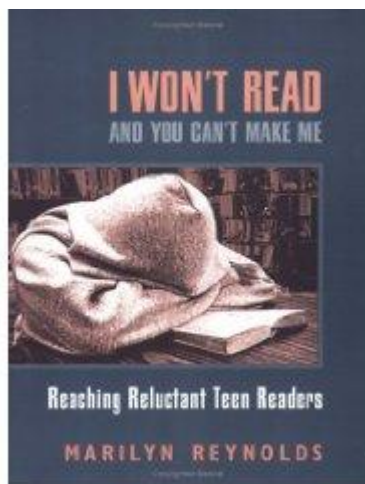
### Book Review cont. from p.3

If a student refuses to read (using what the student discussed in their journal from the day before), Reynolds places three selected books that have either some related interest or are about student(s) just like that student. If the student refuses to read any of those, Reynolds just tries again the next day . . . and on . . . and on until the student's barriers crumble, and the student at least flips through a book. This pit-lined path is also helped along as other past reluctant readers help the student with recommendations and jabs geared towards getting them to read just to shut the outside voices up.

Many of Reynolds' students, being at an alternative school, already come from lives filled with violence, language, drugs, and gangs. Reynolds offers these students a way to escape their daily lives as they enter the safety of her room. There are no gang-ties in her room, no peddling of drugs, no verbal abuse based on socio-economic backgrounds. These students enter a place where the only thing that separates them from each other is the book they read and how they interpret it. That doesn't say there are never any problems between students in the classroom, but Reynolds helps mollify such situations by removing the problem. No talking allowed during reading time. Students who would rather talk or not read will eventually be removed from the classroom and only allowed back when they won't distract others.

What could I not learn from this book? The sole basis of increasing reader interest, aptitude, strategies, and creativity is resplendent in this book. Instead of a type of how-to, it traverses the stratum into a how-I-did. Don't we all learn from real-life? That seems to be Reynolds' main strategy . . . relate, relate, relate!

The writing style and the ideas to help students are all individually good reasons to recommend Reynolds' book. Rarely have I desired to purchase a teaching book, but I will buy *I Won't Read* and consider it a few dollars well spent for both my school's and home's overcrowded "supplement shelf." The only thing Reynolds' didn't teach me as regards reluctant student readers was how to stop their insatiable appetite from over-riding my own-when I run out of books to give them, that even I haven't read, what next? Do we live in the land of Make-Believe and I-Wish? Maybe not, but maybe such a goal isn't so unreal after all. I mean, I hated teachers and quite often told off my sixth-grade teacher, but look at me today. Here I am, one of the most reluctant students ever, seeking to alleviate the boredom with which some of my teachers cursed me. It's a funny, old world, ain't it?



<http://www.amazon.com> New \$17.50

#### Product Details

- **Paperback:** 144 pages
- **Publisher:** Heinemann (February 11, 2004)
- **Language:** English
- **ISBN-10:** 0325006059

## 2008 ISI cont from p.2

This is where the hilarity started and community flourished. People shared as much or as little as they wished. By the time we reached the end of the first week and the first lunch was hosted, we were all comfortable with each other."

"You're right; I have never had a class that made food part of their core," she sadly recalled.

"It gets better," I said.

"Better than food?" she asked.

"There were also several writing projects; after all, it was the Blackwater WRITING Project. Assignments included a book review, a poem, a teaching story, a memoir, annotated bibliographies, administrative memos, legislative letters, and a reflection letter. Most were to be posted on the National Writing Project site where anyone participating in a Writing Project Institute around the country could read your posts and comment on them as we were required to do. It was rather exciting to have someone respond to something you have written, especially if you dreaded the assignment as was the case with me and the poem."

"You don't like poetry?"

"I just don't get it, and now I had to write one. So yeah, I stressed. But in the end I actually liked what I wrote. The readings and the suggestions contained in the GIANT article notebook really helped alleviate the stress. This huge notebook was given to each fellow containing articles covering writing research, methodology, and practices."

"I knew there had to be a boring part to the class," she stated pointedly.

"That might hold true for other classes, but remember this was a class like no other. First of all, the articles were illuminating. They pointed the way through this writing course by providing scenarios, examples, and practices discussing writing myths, conventions, and ideology, thus encouraging discussion among group members to share ideas and classroom experiences."

"Teachers teaching teachers," she repeated.

"Bingo! The only part of the course that could be considered 'traditional' was the professional writing group. We were still assigned to different groups, but each member of the group worked on their own project such as administrative memos, grants, and legislative letters. These were then submitted to the group leader for proofreading and revision suggestions."

"Sounds like a lot of work!"

"It's overwhelming at first. But once you settle into a routine, it's not bad. Keep up with the assignments, and it's a (very busy) breeze."

"How do I get into it?"

"I could tell you but then I'm gonna have to kill you. You decide." I waited for her reaction.

She smiled.

I smiled back, thankful that she appreciated the joke.

### Write Nights

Write Nights will be at Hildegard's on Mondays from 6:30-8:00 p.m.

**Mark these dates on your calendars and come join us.**

Sept. 8, 2009    Monday, Oct. 6, 2008    Monday, Nov. 10, 2008    Monday, Dec. 8, 2009

Are you thinking you cannot make it to Write Night? Blog with us from home. It's easy. Go to <http://www.blogger.com> and log in. Don't have a link to the blog for BWP? Email [Donna Sewell](mailto:Donna.Sewell) and ask to be invited.

If you join us in person, we usually socialize and order 6:30-6:45 and start writing around 6:45. We usually write until 7:30 or so, then read each other's posts, laugh, and socialize. We always leave by 8:00.

**Check it out. A good quote may come from you and be included in the next newsletter.**

Send newsletter submissions by the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month.

**Think about what you are doing in your classrooms.**

**Can we feature you or your work?**

**Let us know what you want included in the newsletter.**

The next newsletter will be published on December 1, 2008.

## News from the National Writing Project

Hi Everyone,

We wanted to let you know about a new, exciting writing opportunity for high school students, brought to you by NWP and Google. Here are the details:

Teachers of high school-age students are invited to participate in an online publishing project that allows young people to write about issues they would want a new president to address, and to publish their writing for a national audience. NWP and Google have teamed up to develop Letters to the Next President: Writing Our Future, a website where teachers can publish writing through GoogleDocs, a collaborative web-based composing tool. Sites are encouraged to reach out to teachers of students' ages 14-18 who might want to incorporate this opportunity into their teaching during the fall presidential campaign.

Registration: August 4 - September 8.

Visit the registration page for details at:

[http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/nwpsites/writing\\_our\\_future.csp](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/nwpsites/writing_our_future.csp)

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Other news and great ideas to include your students in writing on a national scale:

Writing Matters: What's Your Story?

<http://www.writingmatters.org/>

Writing Matters offers online writing instruction for middle schools. It features genre studies, animations, lessons, publishing tools and professional development. The Writing Matters portal is set up to provide teachers access to lessons plans, classroom visual and an online location to collect, evaluate and publish student work.

Click! Photography Changes Everything

<http://click.si.edu/>

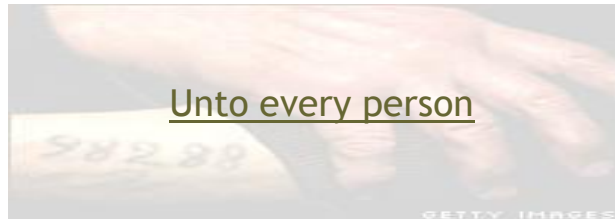
NWP teacher-consultants and summer institute participants are invited to contribute writing about the impact of photography in their lives to a new project of the Smithsonian Photography Initiative: Click! Photography Changes Everything. This project provides an opportunity to reflect on the history, spread, practice, and power of photography by inviting written reflections on photography to be submitted through its participatory website.

The National Conversation on Writing

<http://comppile.tamucc.edu/NCoW/index.htm>

What do people write and read every day? What makes people feel they are writers (or not)? Through online video, audio, and print texts The National Conversation on Writing hopes to encourage a discussion on these questions.

Narci Drossos, Valdosta High School, received state wide recognition. Her story is below. The Gocats.org news article can be found [here](#).



*Unto every person there is a name* - a simple saying, yet replete with meaning. Who doesn't have the simple dignity of a name? The basic entitlement of our names as human beings seems an implicit right for all humanity, yet it was stripped from millions during the reign of Hitler and the Nazi regime as numbers were tattooed on their wrists. The Days of Remembrance ceremony is held annually in Georgia at the Capitol in Atlanta, and teachers as well as students are invited to join Holocaust survivors, WWII veterans, concentration camp liberators, senators, representatives, volunteers who care, and dignitaries from various European countries in honoring the memory of those who did not survive the Holocaust.

On the most beautiful day of the year, the first Friday in May, I was honored with the 2008 Distinguished Educator Award by the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust and the Georgia Department of Education. I can honestly say that it was the most humbling experience of my life. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, and the air was cool. When I climbed the steps of Georgia's stately capitol, I admit to being in awe of the pink marbled beauty. Columns, walls, steps, Palladian windows, it was all just beautiful; but as I went through the security checks and showed them my letter of invitation to the ceremony, I heard the chanting, the calling of the names reaching through the stone as rabbis took turns calling the names: names, birthplaces, and ages of individuals I would never and could never be privileged to know, those who did not survive. In an indescribable way, with both sadness and joy, I felt their presence, and even though I could never know them or change their fate, I was able to be a part of honoring their memory. Perhaps in a small way, as a teacher, I could ensure it would never happen again.

To acknowledge their existence is such a little thing, yet it felt like the most meaningful experience I have ever had as a teacher or as a human being. Just to be there was an honor, and to have the generous and hardworking volunteers of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust, and their sponsor Georgia Power, honor me for a lesson plan on teaching an anti-hatred, non-judgmental unit, was fulfilling in a way that escapes words. Names were called; candles were lit. A military quartet played.

It was a Day of Remembrance and a day I will always remember. I am grateful to Dr. Donna Sewell of the Blackwater Writing Project and the National Writing Project for allowing me the opportunity to learn about reading, writing, and teaching the Holocaust at the summer seminar on Holocaust education in New York in 2007, where I learned from Dr. Sondra Perl, Dr. Jennifer Lemberg, and Alice Braziller and the panel of experts and survivors that they put together for writing project teachers in the rural sites network that you don't have to have all the answers to approach atrocities and injustices with your students. Because of them, I gained the confidence to try.

If you have any questions about teaching students this difficult material, so that it will never happen again, please feel free to contact me at [ndrossos@gocats.org](mailto:ndrossos@gocats.org), the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust at <http://holocaust.georgia.gov>, or the Holocaust Educators Network at <http://www.holocausteducators.org/>.