

Students brush up writing skills at summer academy

Written by News Staff
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GUSTINE – Two classes of students received hands-on assistance to brush up their writing skills earlier this summer. Nineteen students in grades 6-9 recently completed the Migrant Young Writers Academy held at Gustine Middle School in June.

Diane Shaw and Diana Jimenez are each teacher/consultants with the UC Merced Summer Writing Institute. They brought the program to Gustine, and hope to make it bigger and better each year.

“This was the first year and it was absolutely amazing,” declared Shaw, who taught the combined 6/7 class. She voiced admiration for the students’ enthusiasm and their desire to become better writers.

In the short three-week program, Shaw saw extensive growth and change in student skills and their perceptions about writing.

A good example is seventh-grader Sergio Sanchez. “At first I thought writing was boring but then when I learned about revisions and how to revise my own work, writing became more fun,” he explained.

Giving students the opportunity to improve their writing is the focus of the academy. Helping students feel more comfortable with their writing, teaching them useful skills and introducing them to techniques that will help prepare them for their futures are among the benefits of the program.

Writing, Shaw stressed, is a life skill.

Many potential employers, she pointed out, require strong written communication skills. “You have to be able to share your ideas clearly,” she encouraged her students. In addition, students need to build their writing skills in preparation for the high school exit exam and for the essays required in many college applications.

The students attending the academy were introduced to those career building skills through the entries made in their personal “narratives and insights” journal and completion of their “response to literature” final project.

Students began each day with journal entries allowing them to free-write, when they began gathering their thoughts and ideas in an unstructured format.

The older class kept a personal narrative and insights journal and the younger class had a seed list they worked from. “Having choices (of topics) lessened their anxiety about writing,” Shaw noted.

Once the students were “hooked onto writing” as the teacher described, the daily lessons developed and the assignments grew.

Students worked in small groups, with a partner, individually with the teacher and as a whole class. The class offered peer conferencing for editing and reviews in a positive environment. Students learned to ask questions of the authors for clarity and authors learned to receive constructive suggestions from their audience.

By the end of the program they had read a book, written an essay about it with quotes from the book substantiating their opinions and had produced an autobiographical essay which was presented and displayed for their guests at their closing ceremony.

“I learned that writing is neither right nor wrong, it’s just writing!” exclaimed Paola Montoya. That revelation was shared by many of the students. It was a freedom that opened doors to their creative skills and seemed to give them a voice in their writing that hadn’t been realized before.

“The kids learned that writing doesn’t have to be so laborious,” Shaw summarized with a smile.

Sisters Blanca and Alina Herrera couldn’t stop talking about everything they learned in the three weeks they attended from drafting, to revising, to learning how to take cornell notes, to feeling more confident about their writing.

They are both glad they chose to spend a few weeks of their summer in the classroom. “We thought it (the academy) would help us. We care about our education,” they agreed. And they look forward to attending next summer if the academy is offered again

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