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NEATE NEWS

New England Association of Teachers of English

Ann Garland West: Inspiring and Honoring Excellence

By Debbie Wolfein

The Ann Garland West Excellence in Teaching Award was recently re-named after a model educator and leader. Presented annually at the NEATE Fall Conference, this award honors an exemplary educator with at least seven years' experience teaching English/Language Arts. Ann Garland West embodies this award through her extensive knowledge of language arts, her interest in and concern for students, her ability to challenge and motivate them, and her deep involvement in professional organizations and staff development.

Mrs. West recently retired as English Department Chair from Pinkerton Academy in Derry, NH after 53 years as an English teacher. Very active in the New England Association of Teachers of English and the New Hampshire Council of Teachers of English, which she co-founded, Mrs. West has mentored countless language arts teachers and leaders. She has inspired many students to seek careers in teaching, in writing, in journalism, and in drama. She created the Pinkerton Players, a premier theatre group in New Hampshire, and directed over 75 plays. Pinkerton Academy dedicated the English Wing of its Spaulding Arts Center to Mrs. West, elected her to its Hall of Fame and awarded her the Trustee's Meritorious Service award and the Shepard Faculty Award in recognition of her many contributions.

Mrs. West models active engagement in her profession and in her community. Educational Director for the NH Chapter of Girls State for the past 53 years, she served on Girls Nation Government staff twice and was president of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International as well as NEATE and NHCTE. She has contributed to language arts education through a number of significant committees, including a Task Force on Writing chaired by Don Murray and several New England Common Assessment Program subcommittees. Mrs. West has chaired language arts conferences, served as site chair and parliamentarian, and presented countless workshops on every aspect of language arts education. NEATE honored her with its prestigious Charles Swain Thomas award.

NEATE members may nominate qualified colleagues or themselves for the Ann Garland West Excellence in Teaching Award by visiting <http://neate.org/>, downloading forms, and submitting them as directed. Information is also available from Barbara Wahlberg, NEATE Awards Chair, 27 Kent Street, Cumberland, RI 02864 or by email at barbarawahlberg@hotmail.com.

What a wonderful way to honor our veteran educators, Ann Garland West, and our profession!

The Lessons of Reflection

By Sophia Gintoff

He was a tall senior clad in a varsity athlete's jacket. As the literacy teacher at Bristol Eastern High School, I typically interacted with mostly younger students. He quickly explained that it was not him, but his mother that had requested he learn some new reading strategies. I asked him about his classes and the reading assignments he currently had. When he mentioned *The Scarlet Letter*, he seemed surprised as I expressed my own trouble with some of the more sophisticated vocabulary.

I sat him down with a copy of a passage from the novel and two highlighters. I asked him to highlight every word in purple to indicate understanding or in orange to indicate misunderstanding. After he had finished, I asked him what he had learned about his own reading style.

"Well, I learned that Pearl and Hester..."

"Wait, that's about the book. What did you learn about the way you read?"

I then pointed out for him what I noticed about his highlighting. He tended to use orange on descriptive passages and certain advanced vocabulary words. We began to discuss what that meant about his reading, and we started to develop strategies to help conquer the difficulties he faced.

What amazed me about this interaction was the fact that he had never thought about his own reading process before. He had never thought about his own thinking. As teachers, most of us identify ourselves as learners. We have either innately or through trial and error discovered the best way for us to study, learn, read, correct. Thinking about the processes in our lives is a natural *process* for us. We engage in thinking about our actions before, during, and after.

Teaching students to reflect and think about their reading process is a vital step in aiding in creating and deepening comprehension. If you have a moment, stop and think about your own unique reading process. Where do you prefer to read and does that change based on what you are reading? What does your ideal environment look like? What is your thought process like when

reading a difficult text, an engaging text, or an emotional text? Where does your mind wander? What do you do when it goes off task? Then, share the answers with your students and begin the conversation of asking your students to consider their own unique reading process. I guarantee it will lead students to find new strategies to help them become better readers and thinkers.

Even more beneficial, ask students to reflect on the many processes in their lives. Ask them to explain how they go about communicating or making decisions. The conversations might be very rich and enlightening. If you get a chance, please share your experiences on the NEATE website. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

NEATE FALL CONFERENCE

November 2 and 3, 2012
Holiday Inn
Mansfield, MA

As teachers, we are all
experts in at least one area.
How about sharing your
expertise at the fall
conference?

Because the focus is cross curricular, please share the call for proposals with colleagues in the other subject areas or consider presenting as a team.

Please consider presenting at the fall conference. See the pages 3-4 for the call for proposals.

Call for Workshop Proposals

New England Association of Teachers of English (NEATE) 2012 Fall Conference
November 2 and 3, 2012 at the Holiday Inn, Mansfield, Massachusetts

Common Core, Common Cause: Literacy Learning in the Content Areas Deadline for proposals is May 31, 2012.

NEATE invites teachers and graduate students at all levels of education to submit proposals for presentations for its fall conference. The theme of this year's conference, "**Common Core, Common Cause: Literacy Learning in the Content Areas**" will focus bridging the gap between the English classroom and other core classes. In order to foster creative thinking and masterful communication skills among students, we seek to expand the knowledge of educators to use the Common Core effectively in the language arts classroom and beyond.

Conference participants especially appreciate hands-on approaches that provide strategies that can easily be adapted to the classroom. NEATE members value sessions on various genres and approaches as well as workshops highlighting the central role of creativity, imagination, and innovation in teaching and learning. The following list is intended only to provide suggestions from which presenters will develop useful and authentic workshops:

- The teaching of writing or reading
- The teaching of speaking and listening
- Book clubs and reading for pleasure
- Meeting diverse needs
- The role of the arts in literacy
- Balancing rigor and support
- Reading and writing online
- Digital portfolios
- Collaboration across content areas
- Practical applications of digital technology
- Common Core Standards and objectives, essential questions, enduring understandings, and skills
- Innovative methods in teaching the classics or standards
- Creative approaches to standards- based learning
- The teaching of classic and/or contemporary literature
- Critical thinking across the curriculum
- The teaching of film and media
- Strategies/approaches that engage the at-risk students
- TESOL and the language arts classroom
- Real-world application of literacy skills
- Technology in the classroom
- Bullying
- Reading and writing in the content areas

Workshop presenters are encouraged (but not required) to consider submitting articles for publication in NEATE's *The Leaflet*.

Presenters (including multiple presenters) are required to register for the conference. Presenters are eligible for a \$25 discount.

An electronic copy of the Call for Proposals form is available on the website. www.neate.org

New England Association of Teachers of English
Workshop Proposal for the 2012 NEATE Fall Conference
November 2 and 3, 2012

Common Core, Common Cause: Literacy Learning in the Content Areas Deadline:
May 31, 2012

Holiday Inn Mansfield, Massachusetts (off both I-95 and I-495)

Please print clearly. Feel free to make copies of this form for more than one presenter.

Name(s): _____

Please check your preferred mailing address, but include both addresses so that NEATE can reach you easily.

Home address: _____

Home/Cell phone: _____ E-mail: _____

Work address: _____

Work phone: _____ Fax: _____

Proposed workshop title: _____

Circle appropriate audience: G – general C – college H – high school M – middle/junior high

Presentations are 75 minutes in length. Circle preferred time for presentation and note limitations on availability (Conference chairs will attempt to accommodate requests, but will need to balance workshop offerings).

Friday, November 2 morning afternoon Saturday, November 3 morning

Workshop Description (100 word maximum). Attach a separate page, if you prefer.

Biography: (Bio of no more than 50 words for each presenter should include, but is not limited to, position, teaching career, publications, other workshops given, interesting ideas or approaches):

Please note: Presenters are responsible for their own handouts/copies for their presentations/workshops. Presenters should plan to provide their own audio-visual equipment. Special circumstances should be noted here.

Send proposals and titles of books relevant to your presentation (for the conference book table) to EITHER of the co-chairs:

Maggie Stevens Lopez stevens.maggiej@gmail.com 74 North St. Hamden, CT 06514
OR

Kim Parker kimpossible97@gmail.com 15 Dracut St. Boston, MA 02124

A Look at the Common Core Standards from a Higher Ed Perspective

By Elaine Craghead

I've taught writing and literature courses at the college level—large state institutions, small liberal arts schools, and everything in between—for nearly twenty-five years, and I can attest to the nearly constant griping from post-secondary instructors about the skill levels of freshmen and the amount of work that these students need to do, ironically, in order to be truly “college ready.”

I have participated in some of those gripe sessions, so it was with a great deal of curiosity, anticipation, and just plain hope that I examined the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Instructors like myself have been most concerned with weaknesses in college students' writing abilities--mechanical skills, organization, and idea development—as well as their skill in analyzing literature--reading comprehension and critical thinking skills--and the graduated standards set forth in the Common Core do address those needs in seemingly efficient and effective ways. In fact, the focus on developing these skills in an integrated fashion is one of the most valuable and insightful aspects of the Common Core. Though separate sections of the standards are ascribed to various literacies; in fact the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and analysis are generally brought together to be taught in conjunction with one another, as they ought to be. In addition, the emphasis on fostering students' independence and research skills will prove invaluable at the college level.

As an instructor of public speaking, I found it especially refreshing to note that the standards also emphasized oral communication—a skill which is absolutely necessary at the college level, but which is often neglected; instructors at all levels seem to expect students to know how to present effectively and rarely take the time to carefully and thoroughly instruct them (and allow them to practice) in the most and least effective presentation methods. The fact that small group dynamics are included in this section of the standards is key: stepped progression starting at grade six and going through high school allows for students to practice impromptu speaking

in low-stakes scenarios before moving on to lead those small groups and give more formal presentations. And again there is an integration of skills: writing and analysis—organizing ideas and delineating the arguments of others—are included in the section on speaking and listening.

Thus in general, my expectations were met, in some senses even exceeded, and I look forward to seeing how far these standards might take students in terms of their college preparedness. Yet I do have one hesitation: though the standards supposedly allow for “flexibility in high school course design,” I'm not certain that flexibility is always in place, and I wonder whether that lack may not keep some students from reaching their ultimate college readiness level. Here is an example: in the section on “Reading Standards for Literature 6-12,” junior and senior students in high school are expected to “analyze multiple interpretations” of a literary text, “evaluating how each version interprets the source text” (“Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” #7). Given that this seems to function as a kind of capstone reading/analytical assignment for students about to enter college, I have to say that it is not enough. Though much depends upon assignment design, instructional ability and student skill levels, this assignment ultimately might tend to lead to a kind of tedious comparison/contrast, which fosters less sophisticated analytical thinking than asking students instead to look at the relationships among seemingly disparate texts in order to find the hidden, or at least less obvious, connections. Certainly a teacher might give both types of assignments if there is time, but how often is there extra time? And given that teachers must adhere to the assignment as proscribed in the standards, in these types of instances they might not be able to allow their students to truly stretch analytically, to develop the critical thinking skills that would best prepare them for the rigors of academe.

Elaine Craghead is a member of the board of NEATE and an assistant professor at Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

Evaluating the Common Core

by Jason Courtmanche

The Common Core Standards are the latest in a line of reform movements lauded as the panacea for all educational ills. If you buy the arguments, the Common Core will resolve achievement gaps, ameliorate disparities between states, and prepare all students for college. Upon closer inspection, the Common Core looks more like window dressing than substantive reform. The notion that the Common Core will resolve the achievement gaps within and between states rests on faulty logic. And the notion that the Common Core will provide the bridge to college literacy skills rests on magical thinking.

In February, the *Hartford Courant* ran an op-ed piece by a superintendent of schools that calls for more coordination between high schools and colleges in the development of college-level curricula for high schools. In and of itself, this is an undeniably worthwhile goal. The larger question regards how we accomplish this. The author of the piece acknowledged the difficulty in making this happen, and concluded, reluctantly, that state legislatures will need to mandate this coordination. And this is where I balk at the argument.

Essentially, there are several problems with such a mandate. One is that the details of implementation would be highly complicated and costly. Another is that, at least in Connecticut, several existing mandates interfere with the goal of coordination. Lastly, mandates alone achieve nothing.

First of all, if the state were to issue such a mandate, who would be responsible for the coordination? At the high school level, such coordination could be handled by a curriculum director, but not every district has one, and many that once did, lost them in recent budget cuts. We would have to create or reinstate many assistant superintendent positions, at no small cost to towns. Then, who would be responsible at the college level? Schools of education already have a great deal of communication with high schools, though this does not typically include curriculum development. Would we add this responsibility to

those they already possess? Or would specific departments within schools of liberal arts and sciences be the ones to communicate with high schools in order to develop discipline-specific curricula? That might make more sense, but the necessary positions don't currently exist within most university departments.

Other obstacles are presented by existing mandates, such as standardized assessments, like the Connecticut Academic Performance Test, or CAPT, which is administered to sophomores and is a graduation requirement. Much like SAT and Advanced Placement tests, the CAPT requires students to analyze short passages, answer multiple choice questions, and complete several timed, written responses to prompts. This is not really college-level academic work, but even when high school teachers know this, the pressure placed on them to prepare their students for these tests can be overwhelming.

This situation is often made worse by superintendents, principals, and boards of education who feel great pressure themselves to have high CAPT scores published in the newspaper, to have accreditation agencies laud them for offering AP courses, and to chase after the money dangled by programs such as Project Opening Doors, all of which can lure administrators away from more rigorous college-level work.

So perhaps everything I have said actually supports the point that only a legislative mandate could force the resolution of these issues. Perhaps such a solution already exists in the adoption of the Common Core Standards.

The Common Core Standards are advertised as "reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college." In theory, the Common Core Standards will prepare students for college because they mandate a better curriculum, higher standards, and greater uniformity within and between states.

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However, as Tom Newkirk says, “Bad things happen to good ideas when they become mandates.” Newkirk’s point is that top-down mandates exclude teachers, resulting in a lack of understanding or buy-in, and therefore take what may have been dynamic and effective classroom practices and render them formulaic and ineffective. A recent study by the Brookings Institution support this assertion.

The 2012 Brown Center Report on Public Education concludes that, while most states already have standards (since 2003, per federal law), these standards have had little to no effect upon existing achievement gaps within states. Therefore, common standards for all states cannot be expected to equalize gaps between states. The report uses Massachusetts and Mississippi to demonstrate this point. Prior to 2003, Massachusetts had a large achievement gap between its highest and lowest performing students. Since the adoption of state standards, this gap has endured. Mississippi has some of the lowest performing students of any state. Its overall performance is relatively equal to the performance of the lowest performing students in Massachusetts. The Common Core State Standards purport to “ensure that students are receiving a high quality education consistently, from school to school and state to state.” But why should we expect common national standards to eliminate a gap between two states when an existing state standard cannot eliminate a similar gap between groups within a state, even after almost a decade since adoption?

Therefore, the belief that common standards for all states will produce improved college literacy skills for all students is magical thinking based upon zero evidence.

From examples such as the one above, the Brown study arrives at a disturbing conclusion. The report states that, “empirical evidence suggests that the Common Core will have little effect on American students’ achievement. The nation will have to look elsewhere for ways to improve schools.”

Many of us would like to believe that standardization—and mandated standardization, in this particular case—will close the achievement gaps between groups and between states, as well as

prepare all students for college. The truth is that mandates accomplish nothing in and of themselves. So while improved curricula, higher standards, and better coordination between high schools and colleges are all desirable goals, real solutions—if permitted—will have to be much more creative, organic, diverse, complex, and from the ground up than anything a mandate can offer. Whether we like it or not.

Jason Courtmanche is a member of NEATE, former presenter at the NEATE fall conferences, and the director of The Connecticut Writing Project at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CT.

The Leaflet is looking for contributions. Become part of the legacy of great writers like Robert Frost and Steven King.

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS:

Considering the frequent changes that occur in the classroom and at the national and state levels, we wish to provide English teachers across New England with articles that have a more current pedagogical focus. Manuscripts will be accepted for each issue that describe innovative teaching strategies, recent classroom research, and lesson plans or reading recommendations to assist us in our vocation. Book reviews will also be accepted.

In addition, in each issue, we include original fiction and poetry written by the very talented teachers amongst us willing to submit their work for publication.

See the website www.neate.org for submission requirements and instructions.

Take A Look Inside...

Enclosed is the Call for Proposals!

We value our teachers at the NEATE fall conference. Consider sharing your expertise with the NEATE community. Send your completed proposal to one of the NEATE co-chairs

before May 31, 2012. We will do our best to notify you before the end of the school year, if you have been selected, so you can request a professional day.



NEATE

New England
Association
of Teachers
of English

Treasurer
Dick West
843 Gould Hill Rd
Contoocook, NH
03229

www.neate.org