

# The Michigan Council of Teachers of English

September 2009

Motivating and inspiring Michigan's English Language Arts teachers.

The Michigan English Teacher E-Newsletter

## President's Update

By Toby Kahn-Loftus  
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Whether teaching middle school or college, I always get excited to begin another wonderful year of teaching and learning. I love the idea of a fresh start, a new group of students, another opportunity to revise and fine-tune my curriculum. This constant "new beginning" is one of the things I love most about teaching...the new group of students, and all of the opportunities for new learning.

**This past spring and summer** I've worked with many groups of teachers in multiple districts: from **Atlanta** to **Saginaw**, and from **Oscoda** to **Evart**. What I have noticed in these communities, like countless other schools in Michigan, is that a huge majority of educators are inspiring, dedicated, caring teachers who strive to help their students achieve no matter what the conditions of their school or district. We have some extraordinary teachers in Michigan's public schools and they inspire me with their creative hard work and amazing resilience...often in the face of rigid mandates that insult their professionalism and infringe on their academic freedom.

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Next Issue-September 25, 2009 Conference Preview

**MCTE was founded in 1924** and it seems that for many of the eighty-five years that our organization has been engaged in supporting teachers there have been outside influences and programs impacting the lives of teachers and children. One of our key goals is to "disseminate current English education scholarship and assist English language arts teachers as they make decisions about pedagogical practices, student populations, and teaching philosophies." As president of MCTE I will strive to continue our dedication to that goal.

**We will share powerful**, nationally recognized research promoted by our parent organization, the **National Council of Teachers of English**.

*Please see **President's Update** on page 4.*



**In keeping with the MCTE goal** of "assisting teachers as they make decisions about pedagogical practices" the fall conference on October 30 at the Lansing Sheraton/Lexington will motivate and challenge us to embrace new multimodal literacies:

***Many Voices, Many Literacies: Texts, Tools, and Topics to Engage Every Learner***

**Two nationally acclaimed**, award-winning authors will inspire our conversations on teaching and learning: **Jacqueline Woodson** and **George Ella Lyon**.

**Woodson and Lyon both** compose for multiple audiences and motivate writers and readers of all ages to find their voice and tell their story. Pre-K through university colleagues are invited to join us in exploring and celebrating the many tools, topics, and texts we use to engage our learners.

**Registration information** is available at <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/page/conferences-1>, either online or mail-in. The deadline is October 10.

*Please see **MCTE Autumn Assembly** on page 4.*

## Teaching Tips: Apples for Your Teaching Eye

By Mary Anna Kruch, MCTE Past President  
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Over the last few years, the teaching tips column has been graced by the insightful input of **Toby Kahn-Loftus**, MCTE'S new President. With Toby's extra responsibilities, the column has been passed along to me. In addition to teaching tips, I will be posing questions, issuing invitations, and calling for readers' educational expertise – with the goal of making the eMET a more interactive publication. If you have tips to share, please e-mail them to me at [mask92369@gmail.com](mailto:mask92369@gmail.com), or leave a message for me on the MCTE ning (<http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>). You may also reach **Rita Maddox**, eMET co-editor, about other, potential contributions at [wjmaddox1@comcast.net](mailto:wjmaddox1@comcast.net). Thank you!

### Does Handwriting Matter?

When asked the above question, some would sound a firm, "NO," partially, I suspect, because writing is about *how* (process) and *what* (content) is communicated -- not necessarily about the form in which it is communicated. Whether employing digitally or handwritten texts, a writer's best shot at reaching target audiences is when addressees are able to hear *and* read what the writer intends. Naturally, literary devices and writing crafts engaged by writers greatly assist with the delivery of meaning; many teachers would also advocate for handwriting as a writer's craft – perhaps for its artistry, but more likely for its clarity. So, is the above question about handwriting pertinent, particularly at the beginning of a school year? I think so, because what teachers say and do in the classroom *from the beginning* is heavily influenced by what has worked for them in the past. Whether writing it down as a note-to-self, sharing with teaching peers, or writing and publishing for a larger audience, teachers most often choose methods that yield the most success, as learned through their classroom experiences. Formally or informally, teachers all over are conducting valuable classroom research.

*“. . . many teachers would also advocate for handwriting as a writer's craft – perhaps for its artistry, but more likely for its clarity.”*

I am drawn to the perceptive views of **Patricia Lambert Stock**, a past MCTE President and **Red Cedar Writing Project Founding Director**. In *The Dialogic Curriculum*, she says that we tell and retell teaching anecdotes gleaned from our own work, adding and subtracting details in our stories as we place them into specific contexts within a “larger narrative.” (Stock 98-99) Also, she notes that classroom teachers often share their significant classroom discoveries with colleagues and invite them to “join <us> in making sense of them so that we may improve our teaching practice.” (Stock 99). And **Patricia Lambert Stock** knows what she's talking about, as she has contributed to a wide range of educational expertise while filling the roles of classroom teacher, academic, organizational leader, keynote speaker, teacher-researcher, and writer.

### Dialog Journals, Stencils, How-to Booklets, and Fancy Pens

With regard to handwriting, educators of all levels may have found, as I have, that students' motivation to write with clarity of content *and* form can be nurtured through their need for socialization. This concept is illustrated in a comment left by a classroom teacher during a recent conversation on the **English Companion Ning** (<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/>). **Lauren Lancaster** noted that a handful of her students' writing is illegible, and she shared some helpful teaching tips with regard to handwriting improvement through what she calls “peer motivation.” Here are her teaching tips worth sharing: *I would always write them <students> reminders to slow down as they write and to reread their work. Sometimes, I would have the student read his or her work to me. Often, he or she could not even read it. I highlighted the importance of their writing by reminding them that what they have to say is important and should be shared and not misinterpreted. In my classroom, I had my students keep dialogue journals. I paired students up, and each week they would write a letter to their partner and respond to their partner's letter. Instead of having a teacher comment on their thoughts and ideas or their handwriting, a peer was doing it, thus making it often more meaningful and important to them. Handwriting often improved! Sometimes it improved at the request of the partner and other times on its own. Please see Teaching Tips on page 4.*

## Surviving the Paper Load

By Joseph Higdon, Third Coast Writing Project  
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**Stacks of papers to evaluate and record**, lesson plans to review and revise, and forms to fill out all demand my attention. It can be overwhelming. If I'm not careful, I might panic in the face of this avalanche of paperwork. My workspace at home is cluttered, and I fear I'll never even get started, let alone have time to finish it. And on top of all this—no, at the bottom of all this—lies the desire to do personal writing, outside of school demands. I believe in work before play. So I've developed an approach that helps me get through the stacks of paperwork and still find time to devote to my personal writing. I push past the overwhelming feeling of all that needs doing, and I start doing *something*.

**By starting something**, anything, even remotely related to the pressing demands of the work, I've quit looking at the overwhelming aspect of the work. Separating a huge, intimidating job into a series of doable tasks helps me focus. It eases my anxiety. Once I've started doing something, I've eased myself into the work ethic. It gives me a sense of accomplishment. But just saying 'do something' seemed vague and unfocused. So I made that vague something into specific tasks, and the insurmountable work became small steps. I have three strategies.

**First, I start making a list.** When I write down all that needs doing, not only have I organized the work and prioritized, but I've also forgotten my panic. I'm focused. While I'm organizing, I also set limits and become methodical. "I'll fill out these forms first" or "I'll evaluate X number of papers." After checking my list, I grab the priority work and plow through it. When that's done, I feel successful because I've accomplished some work, and I'm empowered to move on to the next task. A simple list gets me started, ridding myself of the panic and clutter, and it keeps me focused. Instead of worrying about getting the work done, I do it and finish.

*"Whichever strategy I use, I become focused,  
I get work done,  
and I feel accomplishment."*

**When I don't feel the need to make a list**, I start reading something relevant to the demanding work—for example, a chapter in the novel about which that tall stack of papers have been written. This may seem like a regressive



step, but because it stops me from feeling overwhelmed, it's a progressive step. I no longer panic about what needs doing. The reading calms my mind. Soon I'm focused on the topic, and when I come to a stopping point in the reading, I'm ready to move on to that pile of papers in front of me. My mind is on that subject, and I'm soon grading papers.

**Another type of reading** calms me and helps me focus. This reading is not related to the topic of class or a specific paper but is relaxing reading in general. For this to work, though, I choose poetry, short stories, essays, or magazine articles. I'm aware of the dangers of this. As an English teacher, a lover of literature, it would be too easy to keep reading if it were a long work and thus lose track of time. The reason for short works is to have a predestined stopping point. The material forces me to stop, and when I do, I'm at my workspace. I'm settled, and I'm focused. I start working.

**The third strategy helps** me at the end of a long day when I'm still processing all that has happened. I write in a journal. Sometimes I can't focus on work because the day's events—school related or otherwise—are still with me, and demand my attention. So I clear my head. I write about specific events and the sorting out on paper clears out the clutter. Sometimes I throw the writing away, glad to be rid of the mental debris. Sometimes I save it, with hopes of turning it into a poem, short story, or essay. After I've written in the journal, I get rewarded twice. My head is cleared, and I start my schoolwork and feel accomplishment.

**Each of these strategies serves** the same purpose. I get my mind off of feeling overwhelmed about the paper load, and I start doing *something*. With practice, I get a feel for which strategy works best for a given situation. Sometimes I make a list. Sometimes I read a short amount. Sometimes I write in a journal. Whichever strategy I use, I become focused, I get work done, and I feel accomplishment. After the work is done, I often have some spare time for play—my personal writing.

### ***President's Update*** from page 1

We will share powerful, nationally recognized research promoted by our parent organization, the **National Council of Teachers of English**. We will highlight research that speaks to the needs of learners and the strengths of teachers...research that stands on the shoulders of decades of data that documents what we know about how children learn language and what it means to nurture literate, life-long readers and writers in our ever changing world. (I have included four links to powerful **NCTE** research at the end of this article.)

Please begin making your plans now to attend the fall conference and engage with teachers and teacher

### ***Autumn Assembly*** from page 1

Additionally, a small pre-conference session will take place on Thursday, October 29, 2009 at the Sheraton/Lexington Hotel entitled:

*Reading Like a Writer: Strategies for the Writing Workshop Classroom*

Focused Audience: Teachers of Grades 1 – 8, Elementary – Middle School

### ***Teaching Tips*** from page 3

**Students' most important social group** is their peers, particularly as they grown into adolescence, so when a request for clarity comes from them, it can make a big difference. I added to the discussion thread by sharing my own middle school and university classroom observations. Silly as it sounds, making writing instruments such as calligraphy pens available to students can motivate both the quality of writing form AND at times, content. *I discovered this when I began the practice of using my own pens to initial homework assignment books, and students would ask about the pens, the "fancy writing," and eventually about how to make various cursive or printed letters long forgotten.* At students' request, I kept calligraphy "how to" books on my middle school resource shelves next to thesauruses, various language dictionaries, sets of old but not-to-outdated encyclopedias, and an old handwriting book rescued from the past. I set up the writing center with supplies such as gel pens, smelly (fruit-scented) markers, old typewriters, a hand-held electronic dictionary, color paper, and stencils of various sizes and fonts for them to vary and motivate drafting options.

researchers from across the state. As those of us involved with **Michigan's National Writing Projects** have learned, it is "teacher to teacher shared practice" that constitutes the most effective professional development. Welcome back to another exciting fall adventure in Michigan's indomitable school communities.

***Toby Kahn-Loftus***

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/WrtgResearchBrief.pdf>

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/21stCenturyResearchBrief.pdf>

<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/onreading>

<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/readingfirst>

**Participants will explore** the strategies of using mentor texts to teach reading, craft, vocabulary, and conventions in a seamless writing workshop classroom inspired **Katie Wood Ray** and **Lisa Cleaveland**.

Cost Per Person: \$30 Includes materials and snacks ☺  
For directions to the Sheraton/Lexington Hotel visit MCTE's website

<http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>

For additional information: [tobykahnloftus@gmail.com](mailto:tobykahnloftus@gmail.com)

**Often, as students took time to form their letters and words and thoughts, they also took time to think about what they were trying to say.** Plus, they couldn't wait to share and display their work, even making gifts of some final draft writing pieces, once their portfolios had been graded. Finally, responding to university students' drafts neatly in fountain pen written, I received feedback that they understood my comments were worth reading and considering – and also that I cared about them as writers. I, in turn, found their informal class writings increasingly more thoughtful and legible.

**The power of the pen** reigns supreme, in more ways than one.

***Next Up: Developing Writers' Voice and Reviewing Punctuation with Dialog Journals***

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<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/forum/topics/what-technologies-do-you-use?groupUrl=nurturingmiddleschoolwriters&id=2567740%3ATopic%3A73392&groupId=2567740%3AGroup%3A41549&page=2#comments> on August 17, 2009.

Stock, Patricia Lambert. (1995). *The Dialogic Curriculum: Teaching and Learning in a Multicultural Society*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

## Pre-Service Teacher Spotlight: Erica Saidoo

By Kathy Morcom, MCTE Student Liaison [morcomka@msu.edu](mailto:morcomka@msu.edu)

**Erica Saidoo**, a recent graduate of **Michigan State University** and an MCTE member, is an outstanding pre-service teacher entering her year-long student teaching internship at **Carman-Ainsworth High School** in Flint. Her animated personality and genuine desire to reach and teach all learners are reasons why her lesson plans have been so successful.

**For Erica's senior year internship**, she had the opportunity to teach ninth grade students at **Eastern High School** in Lansing. Her mentor teacher at that time, **Emily Turner**, explains that "the students responded to her in a natural and enthusiastic way. Erica has elements of both the science and the art of teaching; she knows the English subject material and best practice strategies and also possesses the budding talents of managing a classroom and leading discussions."

**One of her best practice strategies** can be seen in her lesson, from the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit, where she asked students to make connections between the text and

## MCTE offers regional professional development

**Even though MCTE Region 10** was not the principal sponsor of professional development in August and September, MCTE Region 10 coordinators represented and promoted MCTE to over 100 area teachers in several collaborative PD events with the **Charlevoix Emmet County ISD** and the **Red Cedar Writing Project Top-of-the-Mitt** satellite.

**On August 25 and August 26 Stasha Simon**, MCTE Secondary Section Chair, co-led an "Introduction to Digital Storytelling" for 20 K-12 teachers with her writing project colleague from the RCWP Top-of-the-Mitt, Teacher Consultant **Ken Winter**, faculty member at **North Central Michigan College**.

**On August 26 Toby Kahn-Loftus** led a PD session for 35 teachers of grades 5-9 entitled "Inside the Writing Workshop Classroom." **Dan Polleys**, MCTE Middle Section Chair attended the series as a teacher leader from **Boyne Middle School**. On Thursday, August 27, 55 teachers of grades 2-5 participated in the same "Inside Writing" series.

**In early August**, as part of Red Cedar Writing Project's outreach for the Top-of-the-Mitt satellite, Polleys led 11 area teachers through four days of PD on "Blogging, Social Networking, and Digital Storytelling," at North



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photographs, such as the *Migrant Mother*. Using media literacy and dialogic instruction, Erica was able to effectively reach her students in a meaningful manner.

Pushing students to think critically, Erica states, "When students can find a meaning for the topic of discussion that suits them, there is a greater chance that they will remember it and be able to apply it even out of the classroom. This particular lesson helped to get students discussing why the media would embellish a story. Without my direct prompting, some students brought up propaganda, which stimulated a discussion around the definition, uses, and where it can be seen today."

**Erica is about to embark** on a new teaching journey, where she will teach eleventh and twelve grade students as well as coach the junior varsity cheerleading team at Carman-Ainsworth.

Central Michigan College.

**MCTE Region 11** (Upper Peninsula)- Various professional development opportunities.

- ☑ **Upper Peninsula Indian Education Conference at Northern Michigan University** "Engaging American Indian Youth in the Classroom and Beyond", September 21, 2009.

[http://webb.nmu.edu/Centers/NativeAmericanStudies/Components-Homepage/UPndnEd\\_earlybirdinfo.pdf](http://webb.nmu.edu/Centers/NativeAmericanStudies/Components-Homepage/UPndnEd_earlybirdinfo.pdf)

- ☑ **UNITED Conference (Uniting Neighbors in the Experience of Diversity)** at Northern Michigan University - featuring students from the original "Freedom Writers Diary" project. September 27-October 1, 2009

<http://webb.nmu.edu/UNITED/>

- ☑ **Fall Educators' Conference (UPMSA/MARESA/Seaborg Center)** at **Marquette Senior High School**, Marquette. Special sessions for English Language Arts teachers are included on October 9, 2009.

**Regional Coordinators Kia Jane Richmond** and **Tom Hyslop** can answer any questions, [krichmon@nmu.edu](mailto:krichmon@nmu.edu) or [thyslop@nmu.edu](mailto:thyslop@nmu.edu)



# The National Day on Writing

## The National Gallery of Writing



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### Why a National Day on Writing?

In light of the significance of writing in our national life, to draw attention to the remarkable variety of writing we engage in, and to help writers from all walks of life recognize how important writing is to their lives, **October 20, 2009**, will be celebrated as The National Day on Writing.

#### Get involved!

<http://www.ncte.org/dayonwriting/involve>

#### What is the National Gallery of Writing?

[http://www.galleryofwriting.org/gallery\\_browse.php](http://www.galleryofwriting.org/gallery_browse.php)

### Join the Conversations

 **Michigan Council of Teachers of English Ning**

<http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>

 **National Council of Teachers of English Ning**

<http://ncte2008.ning.com/>

 **English Companion Ning**

<http://englishcompanion.ning.com/>

The National Gallery will be a digital archive of compositions accessible to all through a free, searchable website—a living archive of thousands of examples of writing from across the United States.

- Each writer of any age or occupation will be able to submit one composition.
- Writers will include with their composition information about themselves and the reasons they selected and submitted it to the Gallery.
- All sorts of compositions will be accepted, including (but not limited to) electronic presentations, blog posts, documentary clips, poetry readings, “how to” directions, short stories, memos.
- On October 20, 2009, the National Day on Writing, the Gallery will be unveiled for readers.

### New from NCTE



#### **Adolescent Literacy at Risk? The Impact of Standards**

**Author(s):** *Rebecca Bowers Sipe*

Rebecca Bowers Sipe offers an in-depth look at the world of standards. Throughout the book, she raises questions that are significant to teachers and administrators who are concerned about the direction the standards movement has taken. **Principles in Practice imprint**

**Level(s):** *Secondary*

More . . .

<http://www1.ncte.org/store/books/newbooks>

## MCTE Leadership

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*The Michigan English Teacher E-Newsletter* is published monthly and accepts short articles, reviews and opinion pieces on matters of importance to teachers of English Language Arts K-12.

Specific questions about content, length and style should be directed to the editors.

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***Winner of the National Council of Teachers of English  
Affiliate Newsletter Award-2009***

