The *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* is published twice per year (Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer) by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and is a member of the NCTE Affiliate Information Exchange Agreement. The *LAJM* publishes articles that discuss issues, theory, and theory-based practice and research in the teaching and learning of English language arts at all levels, kindergarten through college. We publish articles, interviews, annotated bibliographies, reviews, essays, and classroom practices. The *LAJM* invites teachers at all levels to submit manuscripts for consideration. Articles from many perspectives on the themes are welcome.

*Guideline for Submitting Manuscripts.* Manuscripts should be 4-12 pages in length, double-spaced, and use MLA style for parenthetical documentation and the NCTE Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language. Although we accept print submissions, we strongly prefer submissions via e-mail (as attachments in Microsoft Word or other compatible word processing programs). See the *Call for Manuscripts* at the end of this issue for upcoming themes.

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Laura Renzi-Keener  
Susan Steffel  
*Central Michigan University*

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Jonathan Bush, *Western Michigan University*  
Allen Webb, *Western Michigan University*

**Incoming Co-Editors**
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**Subscription Information**
Annual membership in MCTE costs $40.00 and includes subscriptions to *LAJM* and *Michigan English Teacher*.

Send a check payable to MCTE to:  
MCTE  
Box 1152,  
Rochester, MI 48603.

**Printing**
Central Michigan University Printing Services, CMU, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859
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Looking Back, Looking Forward: Celebrating Two Decades of the Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Jonathan Bush
Editor

The Language Arts Journal of Michigan ... grew out of a need to publish a number of outstanding articles ... to complement the Michigan English Teacher ... the desire to print articles by Michigan educators involved in English language arts ... and to strengthen the relationship between different levels of English and Language Arts instruction: elementary, middle school, junior high, secondary, and college. “Breaking Into Print: LAJM” Language Arts Journal of Michigan (1:1, 1985).

In the twenty-some years since founding editor John Beard and his co-editors, Bob Root, Linda Dinan, and Jill VanAntwerp, wrote this introduction and published the first-ever LAJM, the journal, like MCTE itself, has grown, expanded, and improved. Print styles have changed and articles have come and gone; physically, the journal has become smaller in size and then large again. Editors have rotated through, each putting their own unique spin on the direction of the journal. Issues of diversity, teacher-research, language, writing, history, professional development, literature, and assessment have been addressed, among many others. Topics of ‘best practice’ have always been present, explicitly, in terms of special issues, and implicitly within teacher narratives describing and explaining teaching practices.

The LAJM has remained committed to its original vision: to provide a forum for the best ideas, theories, and practices of teaching English language arts.

Our journal as a jumping-off point for their writing. Most importantly, innumerable teachers, both in Michigan and throughout the United States, have been able to apply ideas from the LAJM to their own classrooms and make their own versions of ‘best practice’ a reality.

It is a great honor to write the introduction to this issue of the Language Arts Journal of Michigan. Not only is it exciting to be able to honor the growth, development, and history of the LAJM, and some of the legendary editors and authors who made it what it is today, it is also an honor to be able to recognize the outstanding work of the team directly responsible for this landmark issue, including guest co-editors Elizabeth Brockman, John Dinan, Sue Steffel, and Laura Renzi-Keener, and editorial associate Denise Abbey -- all from Central Michigan University. We are all indebted to them for their their commitment to this project, and their skills as authors, editors, and archivists.

Each of the guest co-editors took on a huge task: to review all the past issues of LAJM, pick out their favorite articles from each editorial era, and write a review article for each era. John reviewed the early years of the LAJM (1985-1989), while Sue (1990-1994), Elizabeth (1995-1999), and Laura (2000-2004), all reviewed later eras. The result is exciting and extremely interesting. Not only do they create a detailed snapshot of each era of the LAJM -- they also provide a history of the issues of English language arts and teaching during the past twenty years.

Through their reviews and the articles we reprint, in this issue, readers can see how our profession has evolved -- and how the Language Arts Journal of Michigan has remained true to its guiding principle -- to serve the teachers of Michigan by providing an outlet and a forum for the best that the teachers of Michigan have to offer. In this issue, we also honor the indefatigable Ray Lawson, a teacher whose influence on MCTE and the profession of teaching English language arts in Michigan is nearly immeasurable.

We can only imagine what will be in the “Celebrating Fifty Years of LAJM” issue. That one will come out around 2036 or so. Be sure to mark your calendars.

And finally, as my last act as editor, I want to congratulate our new co-editors: Kia Jane Richmond and Doug Baker. I can’t think of no one better to guide the LAJM into a new era. Readers will see a new energy and excitement from the ideas and voices of two of the best teachers and scholars around. We are privileged to have such a tremendous team at the helm of our journal.
As I reviewed the LAJM issues published when Bob Root and I were co-editors, I felt many things, the strongest of which was... lucky. Bob and I took on the job mainly because we didn’t like the MCTE’s totally-unofficial and unintentional policy of putting its former presidents out to pasture, there to be otherwise engaged until it was time to annually struggle to their feet at the MCTE state conference’s Past Presidents’ luncheon and wave to the impossibly-young diners politely applauding from their chairs nearby. More than anything, we as LAJM editors needed to relentlessly remind ourselves that the needs of those emerging teachers were our primary concerns.

We knew that “college folk,” like us, had the reputation of forgetting our primary audience, tending instead to get caught up in abstract talk about abstract students. The LAJM editorship helped keep my own head in the classroom, where real students, not idealized ones, reside. That’s why I felt lucky to be doing it.

It is also why in choosing LAJM pieces to represent the latter part of the 1980’s I wanted articles that didn’t just think about “The Student” (too easy to do, actually), but also looked—paid full attention, that is -- to real students and real classrooms with real (and untidy) issues. Also, I wanted pieces that were both grounded enough and thoughtful enough that they generated ideas and practices that would give us all a sense of optimism about what we do.

Teaching is a profession for optimists. Good professional articles sustain us, helping us to keep the faith by nourishing our hope. These are three such articles: Sherry Thomas and Mike Steinberg’s “Alligator in the Fishbowl: A Modeling Strategy for Student-Led Writing Response Groups” (4.2 [F 88]: 24-35), Jan Loveless’s “Going Gradeless: Evaluation over Time Helps Students Learn to Write” (5.1 [S 89]: 42-54, and Sheila Fitzgerald’s “Taking Stock: Language Arts at the Beginning of the Nineties (5.2 [F 89]: 1-12).

Alligator in the Fishbowl: A Modeling Strategy for Student-Led Writing Response Groups
Sherry Thomas and Mike Steinberg

“Alligator in the Fishbowl: A Modeling Strategy For Student-Led Writing Response Groups,” written by MSU stalwarts Sherry Thomas and Mike Steinberg, has flourished over the years, being read and (as its authors had hoped) applied at the secondary as well as college levels. Comments such as “That’s really neat!” and “They liked it!” prevail from teachers who use the “fishbowl” approach to deal with one of our most nagging pedagogical questions: How can we foster peer-editing without our attempts being aptly dismissed with assessments such as “It’s the blind leading the blind” and “They just use it as a social hour?”

To be honest, many peer-editing processes don’t work very well, although they do provide teachers with a needed break and may be better than some of the busywork alternatives. The Thomas/Steinberg strategy is as effective as anything I’ve come across for getting valuable responses from students to each others’ writing. Essentially a model for demonstrating to students what constitutes active and focused peer-editing, the “fishbowl” process is very savvy regarding the importance of engagement to learning, for it doesn’t just tell the students how to do it, but also has them do it as part of the demonstration. No tricks or hidden agendas here.

The students are the insiders. Sherry and Mike don’t claim that this is a “fun” activity (a term I wish we’d eliminate from our professional conversations, actually), but it is immediately satisfying for a good number of the students involved, both those “in the fishbowl” and those who, until they themselves are asked to plunge in, are just pressing their noses to the glass. Although, as the authors note, it requires some “patience and restraint” on the part of the teacher (what good pedagogy does not, right?), this group-work activity works because it knows its audience. The article itself works because, as we so often say to our students, it shows and does as well as tells.
**Going Gradeless: Evaluation over Time Helps Students Learn to Write**  
*Jan Loveless*

Although I would definitely change the last part of the title if given the opportunity (it doesn’t get at the real power of the process), Jan Loveless’s “Going Gradeless: Evaluation Over Time Helps Students Learn to Write” is particularly dear to my heart for a number of reasons, one being that this article appears as the capstone piece of Bob’s and my first ‘nifty idea’ issue – an issue comprised almost entirely of “teacher-researcher” projects (in this case, all of which were done as part of a graduate class for Midland K-12 teachers taught by Kay Harley at SVSU). I think we felt at the time we were pushing envelopes instead of just licking them.

That aside, the piece continues to be valuable for a number of reasons, one being that it provides an example of just what teacher-research both is and can be (the latter being, in part, the occasion for a classroom teacher to be published in an academic journal). Jan’s topic, writing evaluation, is always the four-ton elephant in our classrooms, so her piece continues to be relevant to *LAJM* readers. And in her case, her classroom research project in using portfolio grading – though only fresh, not new, back in 1989 – provides us with a very accessible dramatization of the some of the real issues surrounding this form of putting the elephant on a serious diet, including the challenge of nourishing buy-in on the part of grade-obsessed students. Jan’s project was successful; read the article to see the details. They are very revealing.

The details argue for the importance of (as does the Thomas/Steinberg piece, very explicitly) “patience and restraint.” The evidence here also suggests that there is great power in letting our students “in” on what we are up to, rather than benignly tricking them into compliance. Perhaps most important of all for practicing teachers, Jan’s account reveals in action one of the most important and difficult distinctions that writing teachers at any level need to make, namely, the difference between our Editor role and our Evaluator role.

Merging, rather than separating, these roles results in those truly irritating moments when students ignore all our in-text commentary on a set of returned essays, instead only looking at the grade we gave them and then consigning our work to literal or figurative waste bins. This article provides us with some field-tested guidance for making our contributions – specifically, our editing interventions – actually count for something.

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**Taking Stock: Language Arts at the Beginning of the Nineties**  
*Sheila Fitzgerald*

I selected “Taking Stock: Language Arts at the Beginning of the Nineties” in part simply to honor its author, Sheila Fitzgerald, who, along with Steve Tchudi and the astonishingly-reliable Ray Lawson, were to many of us new to the profession in the late 70’s and early 80’s (including my co-editor Bob Root and Steve’s eventual wife and collaborator, Susan) the soul of MCTE – and, on occasion, its conscience.

But Sheila’s overview of language arts instruction in the late 1980’s also provides us with some expert historical perspective, inviting us to ask, from our own vantage point 18 years later, “How has our profession fared in the last couple of decades? Are we better at what we do? Are our students better off?” If we hope to be upbeat in our answers to those questions, the good news is that the “bar,” as you will discover when reading the article, was not set very high back then. Sheila divides our professional purview into six categories – two content areas (“Language” and “Literature”) and four language arts (reading, writing, speaking and listening) – then provides a description and assessment of what was happening across the nation in actual classrooms in each of those literacy-learning areas.

In the two content areas, Sheila is pleased to report an increased willingness on the part of teachers to use a variety of literature, including high-interest trade books and, at the secondary level, YA literature. She is only cautiously optimistic, however, noting that the quality of the literature curricula remains significantly dependent upon the publishing and testing industries – neither of which, I can testify from personal experience, were high on Sheila’s list of favorite forces in language arts education. As for the other content area Sheila identifies, Language, her assessment is even less upbeat. Language study – specifically, the analysis and appreciation of language in action within social contexts – was typically a by-product of language arts instruction rather than an established curricular subject. To me, there is another message here as well: as long as language-study is seen as valuable only in the service of one of the four language arts (traditional extended grammar study, done in the belief that it will serve writing development, leaps to mind, as do quizzes on trochees and onomatopoeia), its potential for immersing students in the wonders and sheer pleasures of language will be severely limited.

Over on the pedagogy side of things, Sheila saw reason in 1989 to be warily hopeful about trends in literature
and writing instruction, especially in the assimilation of what
was then the “new” definition of reading (compliments of
the Michigan Reading Association) at all levels of reading/
literature instruction, as well as the advent of student-
centered, interventionist “process-writing” pedagogy in a
wide range of K-12 classrooms. It took awhile, but we got
there. Now we must ask: Have those trends continued? As
usual, the answer is “it depends.” As it did back at the end
of the 1980’s, it depends upon the particular school, the
specific classroom, the individual teacher, the ambient culture
of the community, and, of course, whether professional
organizations, such as MCTE, have been successful at
fostering high-stakes (and inevitable) state-wide tests that
refuse to cave in to the almost-willful ignorance of the test-
obessed political establishment.

As for speaking and listening, the oral language arts,
there is both good news and bad news when we compare our
current situation to that of the late 80’s. A strong integration
of constructivist reading theory into literature classes (not
remedial reading classes, unfortunately) has resulted in a
stronger oral component in classrooms. Kids are talking more
— with permission and by design. As for the often-ignored
language art, listening — a primary (and perhaps quixotic)
focus of Sheila’s own efforts during her last years in Michigan
— well . .
We’d all like to teach in writing classrooms where students work cooperatively with each other and with us. But in experimenting with collaborative learning techniques—specifically, peer response groups—we’ve found that many students have difficulties adjusting to work. A good number are unsure of their group roles; others are reluctant to make critical comments; some don’t believe that they are even capable of giving useful advice. These problems arise out of a basic fear of taking risks. Having spent years doing grammar workbook drills and exercises, and listening to lectures on writing, students have learned to be passive responders. For many, it’s the path of least resistance. Others tell of situations where they’ve departed from a particular teacher’s prescriptions and instead of being rewarded for the initiative, they’ve found themselves punished or reprimanded. It’s no wonder then that they seem tentative and skeptical when we present them with a “new” group approach.

But that doesn’t mean that students aren’t active, engaged learners. Away from class they participate in all sorts of group activities: team sports, performances, clubs, and other extracurricular activities. All of these depend on collaboration, sharing, and risk-taking. As a way of encouraging students to use those abilities in the classroom, we’ve devised a modeling activity—“fishbowl” feedback—which introduces students to writing response groups.

Our intent in using fishbowl demonstrations is threefold: to give students an idea of the options and possibilities available to them during peer-group activities; to encourage them to participate in activities which will help one another grow; and to build a classroom community. Although we happen to use this activity in our freshman college composition classes, we are sure it can be easily adapted to the high school and middle-school classroom community.

One note before we explain the fishbowl: In discussing ways of giving and receiving feedback, we distinguish between “response” and “editing.” “Response” feedback is writer-based: it is expressive and informal and it directs itself mainly at the writer’s content. Generally it is most useful in the early or discovery stages of composing, when the writers are still exploring and experimenting. “Editing” feedback is reader-based and more formal. It directs itself to matters of and style. As such, it is most useful to writers in the later stages of composing.

Our first fishbowl of the term, therefore, is a “response” session. For example, when our students first listen to (or read through) a fellow writer’s rough draft, we ask them not to critique it but simply describe and what they “hear” in the writer’s draft. We begin this way because many students tend to jump right into formal editing and critiquing. In the early stages of writing, student writers need to be encouraged to explore and to discover their ideas. So, when students respond informally to the content of a writer’s rough draft, it often helps the writer to discover or rethink the draft’s meaning.

As the students begin to shape their drafts for an audience, we do another fishbowl demonstration on how to give and receive formal “editing” feedback. During this session, for example, students might discuss a draft’s style, voice, structure, focus, support, and so on. Then, as the piece comes to closure, we ask students to carefully edit each other’s final drafts for surface corrections.

The fishbowl demonstration we’ll describe below is an early term “response” session. The basic procedure goes like this:

1. After they begin a piece of writing, students must bring their drafts to class. The draft can be either a structured piece or a free-flowing, still-looking-for-ideas draft. Our only request is that the piece be at least two double-spaced pages.

2. As a way of prompting them to think about possible questions to use when they’re responding to each other’s drafts, we ask the students to answer this question: “If you had access to the most wonderful editor in the world who would give you just exactly the help you needed, but who wouldn’t give you that help unless you asked the right questions, what would you ask?” As the students volunteer these questions—questions like “Were my ideas clear?” “Was there anything confusing?” “Where do I need more examples?” “Can you follow what I’m saying?” “Is my point clear?” “How can I make my draft better?”—we list them on the board under the labels, “Responding” and “Editing.”
3. Now we begin the “fishbowl.” We ask for one volunteer to read his or her draft aloud to a group of four or five other students. This group sits in the middle of the room (the fishbowl) and the rest of the class sits in a larger circle surrounding them.

4. Before reading aloud, the writer chooses three or four questions from the list on the board. For example, the writer might ask, “What can I do to make my point clearer?” or “Can you guys help me get a better introduction?”, and so on. The writer then reads the draft aloud. Group members listen and jot down their responses. Knowing that inevitably those questions will lead to other suggestion, initially we try to direct students to confine their written responses to the three or four questions suggested by the writer.

5. Then an oral discussion of the paper begins, in which the group answers the writer’s questions and makes suggestions for improvement. If we feel the responders are being too critical or harsh, we suggest that they talk first about the most successful parts of the draft. In the best possible scenario, for example, the responders might suggest a more interesting introduction or some examples or details that the writer needs to explain why he/she feels a specific way. As the group discusses the draft, writers can take notes or simply listen in on the conversation. If writers feel that they are not getting usual feed back, they can join the conversation, ask more direct questions, and/or offer additional information.

6. Once the discussion ends, we ask the entire class—including the demonstration group—to do a short written response which asks them to consider things like whether the writer was specific enough in asking for feedback, which of the group’s comments seemed most helpful, what problems they observed, what suggestions they would make for improving the group, and so on.

7. Finally, we call for a few volunteers to read their responses aloud. As students offer comments, we record their suggestions on the board. By the end of the discussion, we’ve compiled a list of helpful guidelines for effective group work. We then type up and photocopy this list and hand it out to the students for future reference.

This is, of course, a best-case speculative scenario; but regardless of how the first fishbowl session goes, we’ve found it to be a good icebreaker.

In the past, we’ve used the activity at the beginning of the term, solely as a prelude to the first peer responding and editing sessions. But, because of its success, we’ve recently begun doing additional fishbowl sessions as refreshers and follow-ups.

A description of one of these “fishbowl” sessions might be useful at this point, so we’d like to describe an actual early-term session that occurred recently in one of our classes. In this particular class—a freshman comp section—the students had already generated a list of questions and formed the “fishbowl.” They had agreed on a procedure: after the writer had read his or her piece and asked some questions, the group would discuss these questions while the writer listened in and took notes.

Mark, a big, gregarious football player, volunteered to read his draft. The paper, a kind of free associative personal essay, was written in response to an “interest inventory” of topics that the students had made up themselves. Mark chose to write the story of how he once got caught by his parents when he sneaked home from college one weekend to visit his girlfriend.

After Mark read aloud, it was apparent to us that the story’s strong suit was its appeal to its audience—fellow college students. Because this was an early draft, it had some problems typical of most rough drafts, discovery writing: Mark had left out some major events which were important to the story and he had included some irrelevant information, usually in the form of dialogue. He’d also neglected important transitions and time markers.

Predictably, the student responders were shy about taking the initiative. Some hadn’t even bothered to take any notes. To get things started, Mark asked the group if they could follow his paper. If not, he inquired, what could he do to make it clearer? After a longish, uncomfortable silence, Karen, a talkative, friendly girl, began the responses. She made several general comments about how good Mark’s paper was and how much she enjoyed hearing the story about his girlfriend. Then abruptly she stopped.

After a few moments of more uneasy silence, she began again. This time she asked, “Why didn’t you want your parents to know that you were coming home to visit your
girlfriend? How did they find out you were there?” Mark started to respond, but another member of the group pointed out that he was supposed to listen, take notes, and respond later.

Laura, a quiet, serious girl, volunteered next. She, too, said that she liked the paper; but she wanted to know why Mark had called his brother-in-law when his car broke down. She also wanted to know how Mark got back to school. Then Jim, a smallish, shy boy, chimed in. He wanted to know why Mark had included all that conversation with his roommate—something about a test coming up. What did the test have to do with going to see his girlfriend?

Then everyone began talking at once and, in about five minutes, they came to the following conclusions: Mark had a good story that they were all interested in hearing more about. But they agreed that he had left out some important events that were necessary to the story; he had included some information that didn’t seem to go anywhere; and his chronology was confusing.

Even with the tentative start, after about ten minutes, these students had come to the same conclusions about Mark’s paper that most teachers would have. So far, so good.

Then it was Mark’s turn to respond. His parents didn’t dislike his girlfriend, he said; they just wanted him to concentrate on his schoolwork so that he wouldn’t lose his football scholarship. He had been so easily discovered because his girlfriend lived only four houses from his parents. And then came the most important revelation: Mark’s sister had seen him and his girlfriend at a local shopping center where they had gone to buy Mark a baby alligator. Finally, Mark told the group that his brother-in-law drove him back to school because his car had a heater. “I had to keep the alligator warm, didn’t I?” Mark said.

As soon as Mark mentioned the alligator, the atmosphere in the classroom changed. Several students sitting in the outer circle tried to make suggestions all at once. We noted their interest and instead of confining the demonstration to the inner circle, we decided that this was a good time to open things up. So we let those in the outer circle join in.

“You need to tell more about the alligator. It was the alligator that made you get caught. Why did you buy the alligator in the first place? Why not put something about the alligator in your title?” Now, Mark began to ask his own questions and take notes on what was being said. What should he cut? What should he condense? How could he work the story about the alligator into his paper? And so it went for the rest of the session.

This scenario demonstrates what can happen when students have the opportunity to work collaboratively. Not knowing what was expected of them and not having much experience at this sort of thing, the group started slowly, tentatively. Several times, group members kept looking back at the teacher in hopes that she would relieve them of their responsibility. But, eventually, these disparate, confused students evolved into a group of active, even lively, listeners and responders. Instead of simply correcting Mark’s draft, they helped him rethink it. More importantly, they helped Mark discover the key to his paper: the alligator.

After the fishbowl was over, we asked all the students—Mark included—to do a short freewrite on their responses to what worked and what didn’t. In their freewrites, the students were able to point out glitches and successes as well as make suggestions (which we recorded on the board) for improving future response groups.

Not all fishbowl demonstrations turn out to be as lively and helpful as this one did. Even so, having students model this process almost always helps them to feel freer to respond and to collaborate with one another. Marks’ peer group is also evidence that students in the fishbowl learn some specific, practical things about writing, responding, and editing. For example:

—Students become more aware of their audience. After a few compliments and some general questions, Mark’s group got down to business. By the time the students were finished asking their questions and giving their responses, Mark had a very clear picture of his audience and he knew the kinds of information they needed before they’d understand his story.

—Students learn to take risks with their writing. Mark did. He volunteered to read his paper aloud and found the experience worthwhile. In his final draft, the alligator figured as a major character in the narrative.

—Students learn to work collaboratively. After wasting some time and not getting to the point, Mark’s group discovered new possibilities in his paper as they discussed it with one another.

—Students become more aware of the importance of revision. By the session was over, Mark knew what he had to do next. And he was already beginning to revise his paper.

—Students learn to focus and develop their ideas. Mark found his focus: the alligator.
—Students learn to identify (and minor) writing problems. Mark’s paper still had several major and minor problems, but he discovered he could address these in later drafts. As a result of this first session, Mark was able to work on the problems that needed attention at this point in the process.

In general, the experience of constructively responding to and critiquing each other’s writing boosts students’ confidence, makes them more aware of the value of feedback, and encourages them to apply more care and scrutiny to their own writing. In addition, each fishbowl experience builds for the next one: The students in Mark’s demonstration group were only novice responders, but because they had the opportunity to work together, they discovered some of the problems inherent in group work as well as how to share in the building of a supportive classroom community.

Though certainly not a cure-all for the problems created by collaborative learning, beginning with a few fishbowl demonstrations gives students and teachers an idea of what’s possible: given time, guidance, and the opportunity to work with one another in a non-punitive environment, most students can become effective responders and critics.

Having worked with fishbowl demonstrations for some time, we’ve also learned the value of patience and restraint. Before students can develop the confidence and skill which make response groups work, they need time to explore and to build up some trust among themselves and between themselves and their teachers. Moreover, students do not always know what we mean when we ask them to participate in their own learning. Getting involved in the fishbowl encourages them to use some of the resources they already possess, and it rewards them for applying those resources to classroom

Finally, the fishbowl demonstration lets students know that learning how to analyze other’s writing is at least as valuable, if not more so, as teacher input. We’ve found that often they not only find the problem in each other’s writing that we would find, but they discover many inventive solutions that we’d never think of.

In closing, we’d like to suggest that teachers and curriculum coordinators consider using more collaborative thinking strategies like this one at all grade levels, K-college. For although our fishbowl demonstration was originally designed to help students compose an expressive piece of writing, the activity (and others like it) can be useful in guiding students as they write argument, exposition, and analysis—in the other disciplines as well as in our English classes. In asking students to work with each other and monitor their own composing processes, we are encouraging them to speculate, to inquire, to reflect, to formulate questions, and to critique their own and others’ writing. In other words, we’re indirectly urging them to write and think more critically.

To that end, we’ve recently begun experimenting with using the fishbowl as a way not only of modeling writing strategies, but also of demonstrating a variety of techniques which connect thinking and writing with literature and other content-area reading. In the final analysis, the fishbowl is a strategy which gives students the chance to become more aware, active, and engaged learners. Such activities are worth whatever risks we, as teachers, are willing to take.
“I must admit... I hadn’t read the assignment...but should this count so highly toward my six weeks grade, then my semester grade, in my case my acceptance into U of M and furtherly my whole future?”

It was midnight, and Henry’s anguished journal demanded a response. We were three weeks into Advanced Composition, an accelerated writing course for college-bound seniors. The tone of Henry’s outcry sounded frustratingly familiar.

I’d taught writing for years, to students in all the public secondary grades, even to college freshmen, juniors, and seniors at Ohio State. But I’d never had a group that bothered me more than these bright seniors. They were attentive, responsive, cooperative, but so fixated on grades they weren’t learning as I’d hoped they would. The depth of my frustration, however, probably stemmed from my recent experience with seventh graders, with whom I had successfully de-emphasized grades as an evaluation device. Perhaps, I thought, I could repeat that success in my senior class by making it the object of an action research project designed to determine the effects of eliminating grades for an extended period of time.

For the previous three years, I’d been experimenting with a process approach to writing instruction and evaluation in seventh grade. At first I’d graded each piece as usual, even though I let students choose their own topics and otherwise conducted my classes as Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, and Lucy Calkins suggested in books and workshops. Then I’d gotten brave enough to try grading over time. I found the seventh graders very responsive to evaluation conferences in which we looked together at their growth as writers and set goals for their future work. Perhaps, I thought, I could repeat that success in my senior class by making it the object of an action research project designed to determine the effects of eliminating grades for an extended period of time.

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Now, though, I was a new teacher of a successful, well-tested curriculum that had always had traditional grading of products. A colleague and I had modified Advanced Composition to include more workshop time, but we’d also decided to continue making assignments. We had only 18 weeks with the seniors. Our primary task was to get them to consider audience and purpose for everything they wrote. We hoped to move them from egocentric, formulaic writers to what we called “veteran” status. We wanted them to know they had choices, and to make them consciously.

But Henry and his peers were thinking so “furtherly” in the future that they were not choosing and growing in the present. Regardless of the comments I wrote on their papers, they flipped through, found the grade, and punched it into their calculators to see if Bigname U. would tolerate their up-to-the-minute averages.

I had just become involved in a teachers-as-researchers group, and I needed a focus for inquiry. Henry had given me an idea. Since I couldn’t change the reality that it was October and my students were anxious about college acceptance, I decided to try getting their attention by removing their grades. Portfolio grading worked with my seventh graders, I reasoned— why not with these seniors? So I replied to Henry with a proposition to both classes. Let’s “go gradeless” for the second marking period, I suggested. My job would be to comment carefully and thoroughly on their papers, to confer with them in class, to help them set goals for themselves as writers. Their job would be to log all my comments, dividing them into constructive criticism and praise and recording them on Goals/Kudos sheets in their cumulative folders; to work hard; and to help me monitor their feelings through conferences and regular, honest journals. At the end of the marking period, I would ask them to do a self-evaluation of their work, including writing goals for the next marking period. Then I would look at everything they’d written, at the goals they’d already tackled, and at their self-evaluations, and I’d award them grades for their writing growth for the semester to date.

I promised my Advanced Compers that anyone who felt terribly uncomfortable could bail out of the experiment at any time. The only catch, I added, was that they could not “have it both ways.” If some students asked me to return to grading their products, I would not also evaluate their progress over time. Their grades would be a standard average of the grades of all the pieces they’d finished.

I emphasized that in all respects except for evaluation, the course would remain the same. I already ran it as a workshop, with mini-lessons and conference/writing time daily. The students already had frequent opportunities for getting peer response and advice on revision and editing, and I already commented heavily on papers and held regular conferences with my students. The single major change in operation would be that I would no longer grade individual...
papers. At the end of the second marking period, I added, the classes could vote by secret ballot to decide our evaluation technique for the final marking period of the course.

I asked my students to write a journal responding to my suggestion. To my great surprise, all 47 Advanced Composition students agreed to participate in the experiment. I had my chance to test my hypothesis. Would they learn the concepts of the course more thoroughly if they had no regular external measures of their progress beyond my comments, their peers’ remarks, and their own goal-setting? They’d given me at least six weeks to find out.

Now that I had my students’ collaboration in an evaluation experiment, I needed to see what other researchers and experts thought about evaluation over time and student self-evaluation as motivators of learning. I had just received in the mail a 1987 publication, NCTE Research Report No. 23, Response to student Writing by Sarah Warshauer Freedman. She documents a 1984 study of “560 successful (K-12) writing teachers from diverse communities, and a survey of 715 of their secondary students (grades 7-12)” (3). She also discusses a study of response in the classrooms of two San Francisco Bay Area ninth grade English teachers.

Based on my own observations of seniors, the results she reported were no surprise.

For many of the ninth-grade students we watched, grades loom larger than what they learn. These students seem to be caught in an institutional bind; grades (the school’s and society’s measure of learning) and the response that accompanies grades (and often justifies them) are confused with and become more important than the feedback that is more essential to helping them learn. The students are interested in the product of learning more than the learning process. (Freedman 158)

In Chapter 6, entitled “What Have We Learned and Where Do We Go from Here?,” Freedman concludes that “Radical reorganization of classrooms will be needed in order to make writing and learning more important or even as important as grading from the students’ points of view (161).

Furthermore, In an article about her research for the October 1987 English Journal, Freedman advocates grading over time, or portfolio grading, as one way to avoid what she calls “an impoverished view of the functions and uses of writing…only as something to be done for a grade in school” (38).

One of my goals for the students in Advanced Composition is to help them learn to evaluate their own writing, particularly in terms of the concepts of the course. I want them to learn to ask, always, “Who are my readers? What do they already know? What do they need to know? What is my purpose in writing for them? How can I best accomplish that purpose?” If they learn to stand back from their writing and evaluate it on these premises, they will outgrow their need for teacher evaluation. All writers need to make writing a social activity and bounce their ideas off others, but they can improve even their first drafts tremendously if they can internalize these questions and assess themselves.

Brian Johnston devotes his 1983 book Assessing English: Helping Students to Reflect on Their Work to this idea of teaching students to internalize. He believes that if students cannot articulate what they are learning, then they are not learning in a way which is conscious and under their control…If I am right that many students do not reflect, conceptualize and deliberately experiment in English lessons, we should be asking “Why not?” Part of the answer is that when teachers are expected to grade or mark each piece of work, then they do the reflecting and conceptualizing for the students. In many classes there is a gaping hole in the learning cycle: students do the work, the teacher assesses it, the students look to see how the assessments compare with what they hoped for, and go straight on to the next experience without even rereading their work, let alone reflecting on it. Little wonder that many students make little progress in English in secondary school. (2-3)

Johnston also believes that when students write self-assessments of their own work, they learn from the task, as “written self-assessments can consolidate learning, identify challenges and give students practice at presenting themselves” (90).

Such a view is reinforced by Peter Elbow in the 1986 collection of his essays, Embracing Contrarines: Explorations In Learning and Teaching. Elbow says that the real agenda of grading is to get the learner to make “internal and autonomous” the standards that originate outside himself (167). His prescription for accomplishing this purpose is to teach students to evaluate themselves so that they can get “a more accurate and explicit message of evaluation than traditional grades contain” (167-168).

In addition to self-evaluation, Elbow recommends evaluation of portfolios to increase the trustworthiness of grading (222). When such evaluation over time is combined with student self-evaluation, “you can usually draw a remarkably trustworthy conclusion about what the student actually learned and how skilled she is” (Elbow 226). When teachers ask for such self-evaluations before they grade student portfolios, they dramatically improve grade accuracy.
If self-evaluations are solicited in an honest, thoughtful way (perhaps with specific questions to spur detail), students usually write a detailed and honest account of what they have done and learned; and thereby give the teacher much more reliable information for grading—and for evaluating her own teaching. (None of this speaks to the other benefit of self-evaluations: students gain much more awareness and control over themselves as learners.) (Elbow 227)

Elbow concludes that students often “read commentary better when there is no grade” (231). In a section on “The Response Theory of Teaching,” in the second edition of A Writer Teaches Writing, Donald Murray also argues for careful response to student work coupled with grading over time, so that students have the opportunity to show what they’ve learned from their failures. He advocates encouraging the student writer to reflect on his process and become his own first reader. The teacher, then, “monitors the text and the writer’s response to the text” (139).

Murray says that the best writing teachers are coaches, attuned to “insights and accidents and perceptions that are occurring in the arena of the classroom” (144). The most difficult job of the writing teacher, he adds, is “to shut up, to wait, to listen, to let your students teach themselves, for through that teaching they will learn the most” (144).

Armed with what I felt was strong backing from other researchers and accepted experts on writing, I calculated my last set of grades on products and began my experiment. The second marking period started in mid-October. My first act was to ask my Advanced Comp students to tell me how they felt about the new grading system we’d agreed to try a few weeks earlier. After years of standard grading in all their classes, they began with a bit of waffling, apprehensive about our experiment, but generally positive. The following students’ reactions reflect the attitudes of both classes.

Henry, barely holding his fears for the future in check and very much aware that English had been the bane of his G.P.A., said, “I like the new grading system because I feel that it will help my writing and that is why I took this class. My only problem area is that we all get good grades at the end of the six weeks and that I motivate myself enough to do any papers properly, knowing that there isn’t going to be a grade. But I feel that if the teacher praises and then adds a few helpers, our writing will drastically improve.” [Author’s note: Student comments are included verbatim, with their spelling and punctuation.]

Class valedictorian with exceptional math and science talents, Michelle seemed fairly relaxed. “I’m feeling pretty good about this new system. I was worried that I wouldn’t know how I was doing until the end when it would be too late. I really like the idea of keeping a log with all of the comments I receive in it. As long as I know where I stand, and I know what I’m doing well on and what I need to work on, I will be happy. I haven’t been worrying a lot about grades recently (this year).”

Cari, the only junior in Advanced Composition and editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, wants a career in writing. She thought the new system might help her reach her goals. “I still believe in this experimental grading system. I feel it will be especially profitable for me, because I intend to make a lot of progress this six weeks. The goals that I listed on the evaluation sheet are not just what I hope to accomplish, they’re what I need to accomplish. I think it will be helpful to all the students, whether they do or not, because school is for learning, not making a grade. Grades are just some sort of tangible reference to progress, but they are not always accurate. If they were fail-safe, then there would be no need for teachers to affix extra letters or numbers after the letter grades on a report card,” Cari added, with a comment on the Midland computerized coding system. You know the ones that stand for ‘makes contributions to class,’ ‘appears to be working conscientiously,’ ‘appears to have the ability to do better,’ ‘please telephone,’ etc.”

By November 2, I had handed back the first heavily-commented-on- but-ungraded papers. The students’ assignment had been to write personal essays or letters on some topic about Dow High School to two different readers, showing through diction and tone that they’d seriously considered the audience of each piece. The day after they got their papers back, I asked my classes to write journals telling me how they felt about not getting grades on the assignment. Almost without exception, they felt shaky and insecure, but still willing to continue.

Henry had written about the problems of local skateboarders to two editors—of Thrasher magazine, and of the Midland Daily News. He was justifiably pleased with his efforts, but felt the new system would not reward him adequately. “I did quite well on this subject except for my editing, so I would of got a grade (A- or better), because although editing is important, it is easily changed. So I sort of wish that I got a grade, but I think that at the end of the six weeks, if I improve my editing and continue my same standard of writing, I should get an A.” Then Henry began to speculate about the future, and his old fears returned. “The problem is if I do badly on the next paper in the writing area
and not the editing area, I will have decreased instead of increased and my grade is dead, but in the old grading scale I would have an A from this paper and say a C from the next paper, which would be a B (not bad)."

Michelle, who had sounded so relaxed before she got her paper back, now had a bad case of nerves. “I’m a little nervous after seeing my first paper without a grade. Last night I calmed down so I’m going to survive to the end of the six weeks. I think it will work. I especially like writing down any comments. Even if we go back to the regular system in the third six weeks, I’d like to continue to write down the comments on my papers.”

Writer-to-be Cari, the most emphatically positive at the beginning of the marking period, now sounded determined to remain so, despite some misgivings. “I was gung-ho for this new grading thing, so I certainly can’t complain about it now. My initial reaction to my paper was disappointment, since the comments fell short in the area of praise. But I’m thinking it through, and I guess that it really doesn’t do me a lot of good to get praise, since I know what I do well. The criticism can only be helpful. I don’t like it, therefore I’ll have to do something to change it. It’s true that if I plan to write for a living, I’ll have to perfect my work.”

Although they had some qualms about the grading system, no one wanted to bail out. At the end of the marking period, I asked students to complete a self-evaluation of their progress (see appendix) before I looked at their folders. My last question on the sheet asked what they recommended we do about evaluation for the next marking period. Through their remarks on their self-evaluations, I learned that all the students had perceived changes in their behavior as writers and an increase in their knowledge of communication. Still, 9 of 25 students in one class and 6 of 22 in the other said they would wait until they had grades for the marking period to commit to continuing the “gradeless” system. Once they received their grades, however, their journals gave me unanimous response: continue with the new grading system through the end of the course.

I was delighted, because I had discovered that the new system lifted two of my psychological burdens. For one thing, I no longer felt that my remarks on a paper had to justify a grade. Though I still spent lots of time reading papers, I now read much more like a “real reader” than a grader. The other personal bonus of the system was that I never had to deal with debaters, those students who always before had argued for a higher grade. Now the class atmosphere was truly collegial when I handed back a set of papers. Through portfolio evaluation, we had become an actual community of writers.

Most of my students not only agreed to continue the gradeless system, but also seemed pleased to do so. Henry’s comments on his self-evaluation articulated the attitude of the whole group: I have a very good understanding of what my problems are with my writing as well as my good points in my writing...

I have begun to feel proud of my writing because I am writing quite well and sense I know my problems. I will improve on them. This has given me confidence that I will be able to write well on my college papers.... I no longer think that grades are everything, but improving my writing for college... I forgot about the new grading system when working on papers and, it made no difference in my effort, and I liked the fact that when my paper came back, I would try to improve myself from the constructive criticism and gain confidence from the positive comments.”

Despite his increasing confidence, Henry had hesitated to commit to an evaluation system for the third marking period. “When I get my grade.” he’d written. Once he received his grade, Henry felt sure the system had fostered his growth. “I think you should do exactly the same thing,” he wrote. “This has greatly improved my writing and I am feeling confident that I will be able to survive all those college papers.”

Michelle had earned a B the first marking period. Without knowing her grade for the second marking period, she wanted to return to graded assignments. “I found I was highly motivated by grades,” she said, “and this six weeks I had a problem motivating myself. When I get a grade I don’t like it pushes me to do better.” But Michelle did not maintain her negative tone throughout her self-evaluation. “This six weeks I feel as though I honestly worked harder,” she concluded.

Ironically, considering her uncertain attitude, Michelle brought me a book she’d been reading as a student representative to the school district’s Curriculum Council subcommittee on the gifted and talented. A chapter in Barbara Clark’s Growing Up Gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School recommends grading over time for all students, regardless of their intellectual gifts. Even for outstanding students, Clark says, traditional grading causes

The risk of lessening their intrinsic motivation and creating a reward situation that makes learning only a
When I asked Michelle why she’d brought me a book that argued for grading over time if she wanted to return to traditional grading of products, she admitted that she had not read the chapter, but just thought I would be interested in anything on evaluation. The next night she read the chapter herself, then decided to continue with evaluation overtime. Clark’s rationale coupled with her peers’ decisions convinced Michelle to give the system another marking period.

Cari, who earned a B under the new method, was still enthusiastic. In fact, she recommended no change other than recording her comments on a separate Goals/Kudos sheet for each assignment. “I feel you’re on target with your evaluation of me.” she said in her response to my comments on her portfolio. “We seem to have identified my necessary goals accurately. My only worry is that you may think (because of my apparent lack of self-discipline) that I am some sort of slacker... I do learn more in this class than any other, and I do enjoy it...”

By the end of the second six weeks on the new grading system, enthusiasm for it was well entrenched. Students seemed aware of how much they’d learned. Though they were now finished with Advanced Composition, most had clear goals for continuing to improve their writing in the future.

Henry, once so worried that a single grade would keep him out of U of M, wrote on his final self-evaluation, “I have actually tried to make my writing better because I want to, not because of a grade. My awareness of comments and goals has helped me improve my writing and caused me (to) gain confidence in my writing style and give myself a pat on the back... I actually cared about my writing. ...I never thought I would so much. I take my writing very personally now, like it is a part of me.” Henry’s goals for the future included “editing carefully, especially spelling.”

Michelle, who had been so dependent on grades as measures of her progress, had finished the semester with an A-. She credited her success to lots of comments and grading overtime, “I knew exactly what I needed to work on to improve my writing,” she wrote. “It was nice to get legible comments other than ‘interesting,’ ‘o.k.’ or ‘Come on! I expect better!’ — which is what I got from [another teacher] last year... In the past when I’d try something new... I couldn’t tell what my teacher didn’t like because any comments I received weren’t legible or specific... The evaluation procedures made me realize that I learned a lot more than I thought I had. I’m used to measuring how much I learned in a class by how many theories or events in history we learned, but in Adv. Comp. a lot of what we learn is how to use what we already know. Like, I already thought about my reader when I wrote a letter to a friend, I just didn’t worry about my reader in school. The evaluation procedures showed me my progress and forced me to think about my goals.”

What Michelle was really saying was that grades had become less important to her in part because she now understood where they came from—and in part because she now accepted responsibility for her own learning. Her comments echoed Peter Elbow’s:

Grades can only wither away in Importance when they cease to be ambiguous and magical. The present system too often allows the student to feel them as judgments based on hidden criteria, judgments which he cannot understand and has little power over. If he is rewarded he feels he did the right things, but if the reward fails he never knows which step in the rain dance he missed. (167-168)

Michelle now knew all the steps in the rain dance. Her long and specific final self-evaluation ended with a confession. In the past, she wrote, when she received a grade on a paper, she just looked at the paper as a whole instead of focusing on the areas to improve. “I would think (when I received a graded paper) that either the paper was good or bad, but I had no idea why, and furthermore I didn’t care.” She went on to say that she had been leery of portfolio grading because she’d read a short story about a college that did not give grades on individual assignments. Shortly before a boy graduated, he broke into the records room and found out that he’d been graded on everything; he’d never been told the grades. Michelle closed with “I was afraid that was how our class was going to be. I guess my fears were unfounded!”

Cari, whose final grade for the course remained a B, was nevertheless enthusiastic about the grading system. “It’s easier to improve on comments rather than grades since they tell me exactly what I need to do to improve. I learned a lot this way.” Carl’s goals for the future included “improving research skills.”

On the last day of class, I asked students to complete an evaluation of the course and a second “Are You A Writer?” sheet. They’d completed the first on the first day of class.
Cari’s comments on her evaluation of the course summed up, I thought, the feelings of other students… and made me feel great. “The no-grading system was most helpful, because I think it gave the teacher more reason to give lots of comments, and provided me with specific suggestions for improvement. No grades means no getting down on myself, and no getting arrogant either. Generally being treated as an adult… was a lesson in self-discipline for me. I think more classes should be run this way.”

As I tabulated my grades for the end of the semester in Advanced Comp., I noted that I came out with an almost A/B split. Discounting pluses and minuses, I had 22 A’s, 21 B’s, and 4 C’s. At first I worried about grade inflation, but then remembered that this was an advanced course. Most students who would have failed chose to take other courses. Also, I took pride in the sort of inflation Donald Murray noticed when he began to withhold grades from individual assignments in the middle of a similar workshop course at the college level:

After a few weeks the C students, not realizing they were C students and seeing what the B students could do in workshop, began to surpass their own expectations and mine. After a few more weeks the D and F students, who I had thought were working but had sensibly given up— they had a string of D’s and F’s in the first weeks of the course that could never be overcome— began to write papers that caught up with the C students, and sometimes zoomed right past.... I realized that my students had to rehearse and practice the same way that artists, performers, actors, athletes, soldiers, and cooks all have to have an opportunity to learn a craft through a series of failures and successes before they face evaluation.... The result at the end of the course is a certain amount of grade inflation, because those who do not write drop the course, and those who do write learn. (143)

When I remembered Murray’s words, I felt no need to apologize because I had not come out with a bell curve for 47 advanced students. Indeed, I believed the portfolio evaluation system coupled with student self-evaluation had really helped my students learn. In fact, based on this experiment with advanced writers and my use of the system with average and remedial seventh graders, I am now as convinced as Murray that grading over time fosters success in learning regardless of student ability.

Murray says that he evaluated students on “accomplishment, subjectively, I admit, but to the standards I feel are appropriate to the course” (143). I, too, had evaluated my students on their accomplishments, which were considerable. I felt good about my students’ progress, good because they were aware of and pleased with their own growth, good because they felt positive about writing and about themselves. In fact, I was so satisfied with the results of my experiment that my colleague and I decided to adopt “going gradeless” for the next semester of Advanced Composition, right from the beginning.

On the last day of first semester, in a haze of fatigue from commenting on folders and completing grade sheets, I boxed the last of the student folders in preparation for writing this paper. On top of one box was the second “Are You a Writer?” sheet completed by Dave, a member of my fifth hour Advanced Comp class. His words gave me just the boost of adrenaline I needed to start the second semester. “I think that before I used to write,” he said. “Now I am a writer.”

Works Cited


For the convenience of examination, the language arts can be divided into two content areas and four processes: the content areas of the language arts are language itself and literature; the four processes include listening and reading (the receptive language skills), and speaking and writing (the expressive language skills). There is a danger in identifying listening and reading as merely “receptive” language skills, however; doing so ignores the fact that readers and listeners are active participants: they compose meaning by the interaction on their prior knowledge, the text, and the context in which the data is received. There is also some danger in dividing the language arts into six separate strands which may appear to lessen their interrelatedness and interdependence. To see if each has achieved its appropriate significance in school programs, however, it is important to examine each language arts strand separately to see that each area is given some direct attention in the curriculum of the elementary and secondary school.

The Language Arts Content Areas

Language

Language is so pervasive in our lives, so vast and complex, that it is no wonder that human beings have gone to great lengths to understand it and to pass those understandings on to the next generation. But the truths about the nature of language often generate fallacies in language arts classrooms at every level. Language is a system of sounds that combine to produce meanings; therefore many think that students should learn phonics. Our language depends on syntax for meaning; therefore, some think that students should concentrate on grammatical terms and structures. English has a huge array of words; therefore, others think students should practice vocabulary drills. English has usage patterns that are acceptable and unacceptable to certain groups of people; therefore, many think students should be drilled on Standard English. English has a history, having roots in a mother tongue but additions from a variety of other languages; therefore... The list goes on and on.

Current understandings of language acquisition attribute far more respect to the young child’s language learning in preschool years than has been granted by most educators. In fact, rather than pumping information into children about language forms, which is apt to be far too abstract for all but the most sophisticated upper grade learners, researchers and enlightened practitioners are examining how young children learn language by using it. This research is being done to determine how school practice in the elementary and secondary grades can extend and deepen language learning in natural ways (Gleason; Harste, Woodward, & Burke). Above all, teachers are seeking strategies for interesting students in the power of language, the variety of ways it can be used and abused, the responses that people have to language use in particular circumstances, etc. Because research has demonstrated that the study of sounds, words, and terms in isolation has little lasting influence on students’ ability to use this knowledge consistently in daily life, the study of language in some classrooms has turned away from grammar study, phonics drills, usage worksheets, etc. (Smith). Attempts to make the study of language useful and interesting to students in the 1990’s will depend on a radical change in the materials available for instruction.

Literature

American students in grades four, nine, and twelve were included in the research on literature conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Purves and Beach). Results indicate that the best of American readers do well in comparison with students from other countries. The differences between capable and less able students, however, point up some of the problems in developing understandings of literature and attitudes toward it in American schools. In this study and in others (Langer and Smith-Burke), it becomes evident that teachers of able students encourage them to comprehend what they read on a variety of levels, and to respond to the aesthetics of the literature as well as to the content. Teachers of less able students tend to keep the examination of the reading on the surface level, and to limit explorations to personal connections to the piece.

Current attention in literature study at both the elementary and secondary level includes concern over how texts and units of study are initially presented to students to generate interest and purpose for reading. In addition, authorities (Rosenblatt; Purves and Beach) stress
the significance of students’ related prior knowledge and experiences for helping them wrestle with the new ideas that will come to them in their reading. Teachers are encouraged to plan thoughtfully for oral and written work following reading so that students will deepen their understandings and extend their comprehension of the literary piece.

A perennial question in literature study is “What should students be expected to read?” Some would define a canon of literature that all children should know at a particular grade or age level. Most authorities (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford; Sloan) reject this notion as well as censorship of what students should be allowed to read. Most support exposure of elementary and high school students to a wide range of classic and contemporary literature, self-selected as well as assigned readings, books about minority cultures as well as about the dominant American experience, world literature along with American. Book selection is becoming a process that requires the time and thoughtful consideration of teachers and librarians.

As the 1980’s draw to a close, the importance of literature for all aspects of the language arts program is recognized by an increasing number of elementary and secondary educators. Many poor elementary and secondary school librarians and inadequate library services, however, will hamper teachers’ efforts in the 1990’s to provide enriched literature programs for students.

Listening

Listening continues to be the most used-and the most misunderstood-language skill. In 1985 the federal government, in Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, added listening (as well as speaking) to the traditional three R’s (Rubin). Although this action by the government did not dramatically influence the direction of language arts instruction in schools over the following twenty-five years, it did initiate an awareness of the importance of listening and some concern over its neglect. Adults spend at least half of their waking listening, and students spend 60% or more of their hours in school listening, yet the curriculum in K-12 schools is woefully lacking in instruction in listening.

The neglect of listening can be explained in part by the common misconception that poor listening is merely a matter of poor attitude and misbehavior rather than believing that effective listening is the result of a set of skills that need to be learned, practiced, and perfected. A second reason for the continuing neglect of listening instruction is that teachers, administrators, and parents often believe that listening is only important as a school subject in the primary grades and less necessary in the upper grades and high school when students have facility with reading and writing for communication. Finally, teachers lack preparation for teaching listening, and materials for teaching listening are rarely provided.

The increasing significance of technology, particularly the impact of television on the society, has highlighted the importance of listening skills for a few educators and parents (Winick and Winick). Nevertheless, few students at the end of the eighties get any school instruction to prepare them for the influences of today’s technology on their attitudes, values, and actions in life. Research supports treating listening as a complex set of skills (Devine) not only significant in its own right but also important for development of the other language skills, particularly for reading, the other receptive language art (Lundsteen). Research also indicates that instruction in listening is probably more necessary as students progress in school than it is in the early years (Devine). (A study of college students found that only 12% were actively listening during a class lecture.) Furthermore, research has shown that listening, including the higher level thinking skills involved in critical listening, can be improved dramatically through quality instruction (Pearson and Fielding).

Perhaps more than any of the other language strands, listening needs to be an agenda item in the 1990’s. But will it be? In spite of its importance in all aspects of life inside and outside of school, there is little indication that the general public or the educational community is concerned about the neglect of listening instruction.

Speaking

In 1981 the Carnegie Foundation urged that all students, from the earliest years of formal schooling on, learn not only to read and write but also to listen and speak. Although the importance of speaking was recognized for thousands of years, and the classic theories of communication were founded on an oral society, speaking lost importance to reading and writing with the advent of the printing press. Generally, for the last two hundred years, educators have believed that children would improve their oral communication abilities on their own, just as they learned to speak as babies through everyday encounters with adults. In schools this lack of concern for the development of speaking abilities translated into a preference for quiet classrooms where students were expected to spend their time working on reading and writing. In secondary schools there has been some formal recognition of speaking in the curriculum and in extracurricular activities: Speech classes and forensics groups
indicate that many students who can read are choosing not to read for information or for pleasure outside of school. Furthermore, this study and others (Reed) show that a significant number of students ages nine to seventeen are able to identify words and comprehend low level reading passages, but that more than half of the students leaving high school are not able to read beyond an intermediate level of proficiency (“NAEP Data”). Furthermore, this study and others (Reed) indicate that many students who can read are choosing not to read for information or for pleasure outside of school.

**Reading**

Reading continues to get the lion’s share of attention in the language arts. In elementary and secondary curricula, however, the term “reading” has had different meanings and has translated into different types of materials for instruction. For at least the last thirty years, elementary schools have viewed reading as a set of word recognition and basic comprehension skills to be mastered. Basal reading series and workbooks have been the primary modes of delivery for these skills, children have been grouped by ability for instruction in basals written to readability formulae, and standardized tests have been the indicators of progress. In contrast, secondary schools followed the time-honored emphasis on literature, which interrelate reading with writing and which use children’s literature trade books instead of basals, are gaining favor (Goodman et al.). In secondary schools, more attention is given to contemporary literature for adolescents, as well as to classics. Teachers are encouraged to help students develop responses to literature that show higher order thinking and commitment to reading as a life skill (Reed; Whale and Gambell).

Traditional perspectives are so ingrained in many classrooms, however, that widespread changes in reading goals will be difficult to achieve in the 1990’s in spite of convincing literature on meaning-focused reading instruction and evidence of increasing aliteracy. Current tests of reading contribute to the problem by maintaining schools’ focus on minimal proficiencies in the testing situation rather than on the amount and types of reading students do, and the depth of their understanding of what they read.

**Writing**

In spite of great strides in research on writing over the last two decades, National Assessment measures of students’ writing abilities continue to be discouraging. Except for impressive improvements by minority students, the results in the latest NAEP test (1984) show that nine, thirteen, and seventeen year olds are writing somewhat better than in 1979, and about the same as students wrote in 1974. The overall conclusion of NAEP evaluations is that most American students have poor writing skills (Applebee et al.). Authorities attribute student’s lack of proficiency in writing to a combination of causes, the most significant of which...
is the absence of regular and substantial practice in putting thoughts on paper (Calkins; Applebee et al.). In elementary and middle schools, workbooks and worksheets which require single word and short phrase answers have often substituted for writing. In secondary schools, writing has been assigned infrequently, and short essays, often no more than a paragraph in length, are typical expectations both in English classes and in other subject areas.

Yet writing instruction has been an area of study over the last twenty years, study that has demonstrated the importance of learning to write, as well as the importance of “writing to learn” in all content areas (Giacobbe; Fulwiler and Young). This scholarship, however, has yet to have much impact on schools except in certain classrooms and school districts. By changing the focus of attention from the “products” of writing to the “processes” students go through as they learn to write, authorities are leading teachers to appropriate methods for helping students understand the complexities of decisions involved in writing: how to generate topics, how to draft ideas, how to revise and edit, how to adapt form and tone to the audience and situation, how to polish a piece for publication, etc. Furthermore, it has become evident that the processes of writing are as applicable to the beginning writer in the preschool as they are to the college-bound high school senior.

Writing instruction holds much hope for progress in the even though many teachers have little formal schooling in the teaching of writing.

So, where do we stand in Language Art Instruction?

Important strides have been made in language arts theory, research, and classroom application in the past decade. Credits should be given, I believe, to the increasing momentum of the writing movement which has focused some attention away from the “products” of writing and onto the “processes,” the strategies students use as they learn to write, authorities are leading teachers to appropriate methods for helping students understand the complexities of decisions involved in writing: how to generate topics, how to draft ideas, how to revise and edit, how to adapt form and tone to the audience and situation, how to polish a piece for publication, etc. Furthermore, it has become evident that the processes of writing are as applicable to the beginning writer in the preschool as they are to the college-bound high school senior.

Writing instruction holds much hope for progress in the even though many teachers have little formal schooling in the teaching of writing.

To do that, we must first start with ourselves as learners in the art of teaching language arts. There is so much good literature out there now in books and journals it is very difficult to keep up with all the good reading that is available— but the effort is its own reward. Attending local, state, and national conferences also helps us rub shoulders—and ideas— with other teachers who care about language learning as much as we do. Armed with our knowledge and commitment, we are then ready to take on the task of convincing reluctant colleagues that adopting better ways of teaching language arts will increase student learning and motivation, as well as brighten their own teaching lives considerably. We may need to use even stronger voices with administrators, politicians, textbook and test publishers—even parents: Traditions and support for “the way English was taught to me” are not easily uprooted.

In spite of the obstacles we face going into a new decade, I haven’t been as enthusiastic about the prospects for language arts instruction since I taught in the elementary grades in the 1950’s and early 1960’s. That was just before the
schools became subject to the heavy doses of commercialism and federal and state mandates that have governed elementary and secondary education over the last twenty-five years. Yet, even in the halcyon years, we didn’t have the commonly shared theoretical perspectives among elementary, secondary, and college teachers of English that we have today, nor was there much possibility that all levels of English language arts teachers would share common pedagogical concerns as was evidenced in the recent English Coalition Conference.

We’ve made good strides. Let’s get on with it!

MCTE Online: http://www.mienglishteacher.org
Michigan’s home for teaching resources, professional forums, and English language arts events.


Assigned years other than those for which I was co-editor, I enjoyed going back through my 1990-94 issues, re-reading them often from cover to cover. As is often the case, I found myself talking back to the journals. “Oh, yes,” I’d say. “I remember this one.” And I remembered how they spoke to me at the time. However, in re-reading them, I find that the articles continue to speak to me after more than a decade. In going back through my old issues of LAJM, I was struck with how much in the profession has remained the same, rather than how much has changed. Narrowing down my selection to just three articles was incredibly difficult—I think I began with more than fifteen.

I tried to use a number of categories to narrow my selection: authors, themes, topics, but none of them seemed to help me. My theory that there would be definite trends over the years didn’t seem to hold. Instead, I found that there were recurring themes and topics that spoke to the very core of the profession: the necessity of individualized instruction and assessment, professional activism, and continued teacher engagement. Finally, although I was so attached to them all, I was able to whittle my list down to these three: Mary Dekker’s “Learning to Value Learning: What Out Students Teach Us” (8.2 [Fall 1992]: 10-18), Ellen Brinkley’s “Responding to Michigan’s Legislative Mandates” (9.2 [Fall 1993]: 31-34), and Jennifer Ochoa’s “On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher” (10.2 [Fall 1994]: 53-57.

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“Learning to Value Learning.” In this article, she talks about applying whole language in the classroom and using multiple forms of assessment to find out what our students DO know, instead of what they DON’T know. In this yearlong study, Dekker practices what Yetta Goodman calls “kidwatching” and shares with us what she observes, what she hears, and what she celebrates in her own classroom.

She describes how she uses multiple forms of assessment with a particularly challenging student who wasn’t engaged and appeared to have difficulty with reading and oral language. In another classroom, this young girl may have been written off, but Dekker persists in her encouragement of this student. Over the course of the year, she is able to see, appreciate, and document the huge gains this student makes. She demonstrates that all students—even those who come in to our classrooms with labels—can learn if provided with the right opportunities. One size does not fit all for teaching, and we must be willing to allow our students to show us what they know in their terms and listen carefully enough to hear them when they tell us what they need [from us] in order to learn.

Responding to Michigan’s Legislative Mandates
Ellen Brinkley

“Responding to Michigan’s Legislative Mandates,” was written by Ellen Brinkley, who is currently a professor at Western Michigan University, Director of the Third Coast Writing Project, and past president of MCTE. Brinkley’s article chronicles the initial involvement in 1991 of MCTE with the Michigan legislature over the then-new mandate for teacher competency testing. So many times, it seems that these laws, tests, and mandates appear out of nowhere—imposed upon us without any input, and often, that assumption is initially correct. However, Brinkley catalogues for us the important role that MCTE, professional organizations, and individuals play in the implementation of them.

After receiving a mailing from the testing company with the initial teacher competency objectives, Brinkley quickly noticed that the objectives were clearly out of date and not representative of the research or teaching approaches that were currently in use. Upset by this apparent step backward, MCTE leaders quickly came together in an effort to mitigate this latest legislation in time for the MCTE general
membership to take action at the annual fall conference then underway in Lansing. What started in the early fall continued throughout that year and into the spring. Members of MCTE contacted and testified to the various parties involved, including the testing company, the Michigan Department of Education, the legislative committees, joint committees, and the governor. From the Teacher Competency Test to the High School Proficiency Test to the Writing Framework, MCTE has played a role in advising, revising the process, and being professionally proactive in the issues that impact our classrooms. We don’t always end up with the results we want, but we know that we must be at the table to have any input at all.

On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher

Jennifer Ochoa

Written when she was a still a college senior looking forward to her first teaching job, Jennifer Ochoa shares her reading/writing history as a confessed bookaholic who decided to became a teacher because it allowed her to do something that she loved. Throughout this article, she weaves together her own childhood experiences with those that she hopes to create in her classroom, always including the elements of engagement, passion, and fun. She stresses the importance of modeling for students the real value of reading and writing—the personal value, not just the educational or economic ones.

Ochoa argues that once students are able to see their teachers reading and writing for more than just school purposes, they will be more tempted to participate themselves and to see these activities as both meaningful and beneficial. The hope and the energy of this new teacher’s engagement—with the subject matter, the classroom, and the profession—remind us all of why we went into teaching and what we want for our classrooms. It is this continued optimism of new teachers entering the profession that gives us all hope for the future.
My high school graduating class celebrated its 20th reunion this summer. Since I received the invitation, I have had several flashbacks, one of which pertains to this article. I recalled a test in an advanced biology class which was of a multiple choice variety: a, b, c, both a and c, all of the above, none of the above. I received a C, an unfair grade I explained at the time to the teacher, since I knew the material. I realize now that I had been asking for a format where I could show what I knew, while the teacher thought I should have been able to demonstrate what I knew on his terms.

I have been a teacher for most of those twenty years since high school, and am now beginning to realize the importance for us as teachers to provide a variety of ways for students to show us what they know. This realization has come about over the past several years of applying whole language principles in my classroom. Like many teachers, my whole language teaching has evolved over time. While my students have been engaged for a number of years in activities that promote the whole language philosophy, such as reading and writing for authentic purposes, it has been only recently that I have been able to replace the emphasis on traditional forms of assessment with ways that are consistent with whole language. That is, even though my students must still take standardized tests, and must still engage in some forms of decontextualized skills, I can look at these forms of assessment for what they are— small pieces of a much bigger picture of student learning. As a whole language teacher and teacher-researcher, I have used various assessment tools, including miscue analyses, interviews, reading logs, and writing portfolios. The assessment focus here, however, will be on the power of “kidwatching,” Yetta Goodman’s term for observing what children say and do. It is a form of observation that is as much watching as it is waiting and looking for the learner to show what he or she knows.

The story that follows is the result of my “kidwatching” one of my students and recording her growth throughout a year in second grade. It is as much a story about providing a variety of ways for students to show what they know as it is a story of the power of whole language classrooms. It is also a demonstration of how closely intertwined the learning and assessment processes are in such classrooms. And finally, it is a story about what our students can teach us about how to value their learning if we are ready to watch, listen, and reflect.

During the first few weeks of school, Sue was incredibly shy. She rarely initiated a conversation with me, and when I asked her a question, her response was inaudible. She did not talk to the other children very much, either. She was often inattentive and on one occasion fell asleep. When I wanted to talk to her, I needed to say her name several times, each time progressively louder, and even when I was almost shouting, it was a student next to her who nudged her to get her attention. When I inquired about a hearing problem, I was assured one did not exist. The problem, it seemed, was that Sue was in her own world a lot of the time. During those first few weeks, it was difficult to find out what Sue knew. She appeared to have some reading difficulty since she was not able to retell parts of a story, answer comprehension questions, or read fluently. On all assignments she worked slowly and was often confused. She avoided all oral activities. One day, when it was her turn to tell one thing about a book she read, she asked, “Do I have to?” Then Sue’s behavior began to change slowly. The first real evidence of this was a letter I received from her in October after I read Owl Moon by Jane Yolen. The letter read:

Dear Ms. D.,
I like how you teach us. I like how you teach us how to read. So I have something to tell you. I like the Owl book. Have fun, Ms. D. And I hope you do.

This letter was the first indication I had that Sue was listening to what went on in the classroom. But it was, of course, more than that, because not only was she listening, she was also thinking about and responding to what was happening in the classroom. Other changes began to occur. Sue started to ask clarifying questions about assignments she did not understand. In addition, she told me about things that happened at home and about activities she did at home that were like things we were doing in school.

By December, Sue volunteered to share a story she had written during our writing time. On another occasion she did a “chalk talk” about a book she had read. Then one day before Christmas vacation she brought in a book of Christmas poetry and asked if she could share one poem with the class. The poem she chose was a difficult one. She stumbled over a good portion of it and asked my help with many of the words, but when she finished, she smiled.
Sue made dramatic changes over those first four months: from oblivion to attentiveness, from total avoidance of oral activities to choosing to read a difficult poem orally. From her shy beginnings, Sue emerged as a student who understood content, enjoyed learning, was persistent, and initiated many creative activities. These observed characteristics are not only the important areas which describe Sue as a learner, but they are also the basis of much of my assessment of her learning. In order to assess Sue’s learning, I looked just as carefully at how she was learning as what she was learning. The following descriptions of Sue’s behavior demonstrate the expected products of learning, such as an ability to read longer and more sophisticated texts. But it is in the description of the process—how she went about learning—that we discover the strength of Sue’s learning capabilities.

Sue performed well with the second grade curriculum after the initial period of shyness. She was a good reader who enjoyed reading. She liked to write stories. She had a good understanding of math as well as science and social studies units.

Although Sue performed well with every part of the curriculum, she approached learning situations differently from her classmates. Her difficulty in understanding oral directions led to a pattern where whenever I gave directions she came to me to ask some questions. After clarifying the assignment, she could almost always do the task independently. This initial confusion was characteristic. For her to function, she needed the time with me to clarify the assignments. One day, for example, we were working on writing the numbers from 150-200 in sequence. She started the assignment but came to me after she had written 159. She was not sure what the next number was.

"Would I write a ten?" she asked.
"Well, what comes after 159?" I asked.
"Oh, 160."

And with that realization, she was off. I did not talk to her again until she finished the assignment. It was done correctly, and she wanted to read off the numbers from 190-200.

Sue enjoyed school. She liked reading and often talked to me about what she read at home with her sister. She frequently asked to read passages to me out loud. She brought books that she was reading at home to share with the class. In addition to reading, she did other types of activities at home that pertained to what we were learning in school. For instance, when we watched bean seeds germinate in our study of plants, she told me she was starting some seeds at home. In a conversation with me, her mom confirmed that Sue really seemed to be enjoying school. In terms of assessments, part of Sue’s growing strength as a learner was present in her positive attitude toward learning. Also important in my assessment of Sue’s growth was her persistence when it came to getting my attention. Having the courage to do so was rarely a problem for her with assignments; often at inappropriate times she wanted to talk over possibilities for projects or tell a story about something that happened at home. On several occasions I had to tell her to sit down and we could talk later. On one particular occasion she came to me at the very end of the day as we were getting ready to go home. She had homework from her absence the previous day. I told her quite bluntly that I just did not have time to give her directions—she could wait until the next day or take it home and get help there.

“But – ,” she said.
”I’m sorry,” I said.
”But I think I know what to do.”

And with that quick opening she proceeded to explain what to do on each page of homework. Sue demonstrated this same type of persistence with certain classroom activities, too. One day during our study of sound we made straw horns. The activity was designed to show high and low sounds. As we worked through the activity, a few students could not get any sound out of their horns no matter how hard they tried. Sue was one of those having difficulty. When the time for the activity was over, all the students who could not get their horns to make noise threw them away—except Sue. Her frustrated classmates were more than happy to throw away the source of their frustration. Sue, on the other hand, came to me and said, “I have more of these straws at home, so I could keep practicing, and I bet I could do it.” From situations such as these, it became apparent that Sue’s persistence in learning tasks played a key role in the process—and that any assessment I did of her learning must take her determination to learn into account.

Another characteristic of how Sue learned was evident in her creativity. And Sue was creative. For example, she was quick to make connections between subject areas and also between what she was reading independently and what the class was doing. One of the times this occurred was when our class went to an assembly where they saw several birds of prey. When we returned, Sue suggested that we do a graph to find out which birds were the class favorites. I told her I liked the idea and we could set it up for the following morning. Later the next day I told her she could show the graph to the class. She came to me with a book in which she had found several of the birds we had seen—falcon, owls,
and hawks—and asked if she could also show the pictures to
the class. One of the pictures was an owlet. Since the owlets
look different than their parents, Sue was able to offer the
class some additional information about the birds as well as
the graph results.

Her creativity was demonstrated in her writing also.
In one of her reading log entries she copied the poem and
picture of Shel Silverstein’s “Lazy Jane”. In the short poem,
a girl lies on the ground with her mouth open. The poem
explains that “she wants a drink of water” but “waits for it to
rain” (87). Sue explained that she liked this poem because the
girl “drinks the words.”

Another example of Sue’s creativity appeared on an
assignment where the students were given a familiar rhyme
with blank spaces on it:

________ little snowmen fat,
Each with a funny hat,
‘Out came the sun and melted ________.
What a sad thing was that.
Down, down, down.

The students were given this sheet. They were instructed to
use numbers to fill in the blanks and then draw a picture to
show what was left. For instance, if there were 10 snowmen
and 5 melted, the students would have shown 5 snowmen left
on their page. All of the students but two used numbers less
than 11. Sue began with 50. Six melted. And on her paper she
had drawn 44 snowmen.

Up to this point I have provided many details of the
story of Sue’s learning— what she was like at the beginning of
the year and how she changed over time. Sue’s story affirmed
how much growth a student can make in one school year.
Although the precise reasons for her growth remain a
mystery, several characteristics of whole language classrooms
demonstrate an atmosphere where such learning is possible.
In her book Understanding Whole Language, Weaver
describes many characteristics of whole language classrooms,
four of which are pertinent to this discussion of how my
assessment of Sue had to go beyond the measuring of skills.

First, in whole language classrooms students are
viewed as “capable and developing” (25) rather than deficient
in skills. This was an important assumption for me to make
about Sue. Rather than focusing on all the areas where Sue
seemed to be lacking at the beginning of the year, I focused
on where she was and went from there. Even though Sue was
too shy to speak in an audible tone at first, and later confused
about how to tackle almost every assignment, it was my
expectation that Sue would come along, would learn, and
would make great gains in my classroom, even if she was
starting slowly, shyly, and with little confidence in herself. I
began with celebrating the letter about Owl Moon,
recognizing the implications involved with her writing an
unsolicited letter in response to a book. There were many
celebrations to follow as she shared her work and ideas with
the class and became a part of our classroom community. I
was prepared from the beginning to give her time and space
to let her learn, and she did.

The second important characteristic of whole
language classrooms is that “language and literacy are best
developed through functional use” (24). In our classroom
much of the reading and writing activities had authentic
purposes. For example, students wrote stories which they
shared with their classmates and sometimes with other
classrooms. They wrote letters to pen pals. The class read
books and magazines for enjoyment as well as for class
projects. Sue was learning to write by writing real texts and to
read by reading real texts. This contextualized nature of the
reading and writing activities proved to be helpful to an easily
confused child like Sue.

In a whole language classroom, students “learn to
think of themselves as competent, as readers and writers
rather than as mere children who have yet to master the skills
of reading and writing” (26). This third characteristic is
closely linked to the previous one. As Sue read and wrote for
real purposes, she gained confidence in herself and developed
independence as a reader and writer. Her letter about Owl
Moon and her reading of the difficult Christmas poem are just
two examples of how the classroom environment enabled her.

Finally, “assessment was intertwined with learning”
(25). Two issues already discussed affect assessment. The first
is the teacher’s expectations about student learning. When the
teacher regards a student’s learning as being at a
developmental level as opposed to being deficient in ability,
the task of assessment lies in describing growth over time. In
addition, this expectation translates into looking at and
valuing what a child can do from the very beginning. The
teacher trusts that all students will become proficient readers
and writers when they spend time reading and writing.
Therefore, the instructional and assessment emphasis is on
getting the students to participate in literacy activities rather
than worrying about their initial reading and writing abilities.
Sue’s learning story records her growth over time. Whatever
she did as the year progressed was always measured against
her as a student who earlier in the year rarely spoke or
attended to what was happening. Sue’s letter about Owl Moon
was significant for many reasons, but in terms of assessment the letter far outweighed any other previous measure of her literacy since it signaled her joining in the reading and writing activities of the classroom.

Assessment was “intertwined with learning” since every child’s developmental level affected how they were assessed. In addition, the manner in which the language arts were taught—that is, through functional use—also “intertwined assessment with learning.” For example, the very tasks that students engaged in to read and write for authentic purposes were often the same tasks on which they were assessed. Rather than taking some sort of test to show what they knew, students demonstrated their knowledge as they read and wrote. When Sue wrote a letter to her pen pal, for example, I assessed how well she was able to do this task—how well it was composed, what words she was able to spell without help, and how well she used capitalization and punctuation rules. But the task had a purpose over and above doing something to be assessed on. Assessment in this “kidwatching” form happened daily as students read and wrote. And, although there was still a place for the particular assessment tools often used in whole language classrooms such as miscue analyses, interviews, logs, and portfolios, these were still pieces of a picture that needed to be considered with the overall patterns of learning that developed over time in the day-to-day happenings of the classroom.

Assessment in the whole language classroom, then, has to do with valuing everything the student is doing well. It involves celebrating those areas of strength and honing in on less-developed areas to help the child as much as possible as she reads and writes. When we watch what the student is doing and assess in this way, we are waiting for the student to show us the best of what she can do. Rather than looking at formal assessment tools only, we are on the alert for any time a student shows positive progress. For Sue, the longer I focused on her strengths, the more I realized that her only weaknesses were her shyness and her need for additional clarification of assignments.

So what does all this mean? What is the importance of this story of one student in one whole language classroom? I find the story important because it affirms how much any child can grow given an appropriate environment. The richness of a whole language classroom is important for all learners but especially for students who enter our rooms the way Sue did—a student who didn’t listen, didn’t pay attention, didn’t know what was going on, and rarely understood any directions on the first try. It would have been easy but incorrect to assume Sue did not understand the content of the second-grade curriculum. And if I had used only traditional measures of assessment like publisher-prepared tests, standardized tests, and decontextualized skill sheets, I most likely would have had a measure that demonstrated how Sue was, in fact, not learning and did not know the second-grade curriculum. And that would have been wrong. As teachers we need to broaden our focus in the area of assessment. We need to be looking for and using tools which show as much as possible of what kids know and what they can do. The more open and flexible the assessment forum the more we are likely to learn about our students and be able to help them.

This story also demonstrates that all students—even those who may appear to be the least capable, or who enter our rooms with labels that might signal a limited potential—have a lot to offer if we provide an accessible environment where they can join in. In the timely context of our classrooms, each child lives an individual learning story. Each story begins and ends in a different place. What we do as their teachers, and what we choose to value about their learning, can have a considerable impact on how our students leave us: Do they feel successful? Do they perceive themselves as capable readers and writers? Do they have the confidence in themselves as learners?

And finally, in the end, it is not enough to merely provide for a rich and meaningful atmosphere in which our children will learn, even though that in and of itself is not a simple task. It is equally important to listen to what our students have to say—the questions they ask and the stories they tell. It is necessary to watch how they act—what they do and how they respond to various situations. And, then, we need to reflect on all of this. For each student is both an individual and a part of the group—both completely unique and also very much like other students of present and past. Through our observations and listening, we must learn when to provide time for the children to work alone and when to ask them to work with others. We must also learn when to provide assistance and when to encourage the child to work through the problem on his or her own. It is the teacher’s job to find out what it is that the student needs to make the most out of the year’s experience.

Sue’s story illustrates the idea that all children will teach us how to value their learning if we are willing to watch, listen, and reflect.

Works Cited


The National Writing Projects of Michigan: [http://www.nwp-m.org](http://www.nwp-m.org)
The envelope that arrived in October 1991 came from a national, out-of-state testing company. Inside were the English, Language Arts, and Reading objectives for a newly-mandated Michigan teacher competency test. I was being asked as a teacher educator to complete a content validation survey and to offer my comments and suggestions on the half sheet of paper provided.

What followed was a series of countless individual and collective decisions that together added up to making a difference in how English language arts is—and will be—taught and learned in Michigan. Two issues were at stake—a teacher competency test affecting all preservice teachers and a high-stakes proficiency test affecting all potential high school graduates.

I wish I could say that the Michigan Council of Teachers of English managed to persuade state legislators not to insist that all preservice teachers pass a teacher competency test. I wish I could also say that we persuaded them not to insist that all high school students pass a proficiency test. Unfortunately, neither is true. What I can do, however, is describe how we became deeply involved in shaping the events that followed the legislative mandates and what we learned from those experiences.

Teacher Competency Test Protests

On the day that the content validation survey arrived, I had quickly scanned the lists of objectives. The first one on the English list was “Apply the rules of punctuation.” The first Reading objective was “Identify techniques for teaching word analysis and word recognition skills.” I sighed and stuffed the sheets into my book bag.

This could have been the end of the story. After all, I was teaching a full load of courses. As president-elect of the Michigan Council, I was in charge of the fall conference program just a few weeks away. There’s only so much one person can do, and too often one voice doesn’t make much difference. But I did take time to fill out the survey and neatly type in as many comments as I could fit in the small space provided—comments that started this way:

To my great disappointment, the objectives included reflect an English teaching and learning model that is ten years out of date! These objectives appear tailored for a transmission model of teaching and learning the old paradigms. They emphasize form and terminology over content. They emphasize rules over precision in language use.

As luck would have it, our fall conference keynote speaker was Miles Myers, NCTE’s Executive Director. During his stay he took the time to sit patiently with us, offering insight and suggestions as we considered a variety of options. Later that weekend Connie Weaver, also a featured speaker, and Marilyn Wilson, MCTE’s College Chair, worked late into the night drafting a resolution protesting the form and content of the tests. No one would have criticized them if they had gone on to bed after a long conference day, but these small decisions made by individuals made a difference.

At the next morning’s annual business meeting, the teacher assessment resolution was formally adopted. The effect of the passage of the resolution was to focus greater attention on the competency testing issue and to provide a way for more of the multiple voices of MCTE’s members to be heard. During the weeks following the conference, we sent letters and copies of the resolution to the Department of Education, to the testing company, to state legislators, and to the governor. A small group met with the chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee for School Aid.

Finally on February 13 four MCTE representatives testified at a Joint Hearing of the Senate and House Appropriations Committee. Although none of us had spent much time in legislative hearing rooms, we had prepared statements to read at the hearing and arrived early enough to get seats in the front row. Later the aisles were jammed with teacher educators, preservice teachers, and television crews. When it was our turn, we spoke both as teacher educators and as MCTE representatives, explaining our objections and offering to help design a more appropriate assessment. But we sat for five hours before the first of us was called to testify. In hindsight, I realize that our MCTE colleagues would certainly have understood if we had slipped out after the first four hours, but again individual decisions to stick it out made a difference.

In the spring some of us were asked to participate in the review of test items. It took a whole day of sitting in a...
hotel ballroom reading items and writing out objections. We later learned how important each individual response was, since apparently each content area test was reviewed by as few as five persons across the state.

Once all the reviews were done and the materials had been studied, the Department of Education and the testing company decided to create an entire new Reading test, to include the English test as one of only twenty (of the 75 or so tests) identified for eventual revision, and to schedule the Language Arts test for immediate revision. Several of the MCTE protestors were among the group later convened to produce the new Language Arts objectives. Fortunately, the revision process has not been superficial but has involved substantive discussions and decisions and the opportunity to produce test objectives based on current English language arts theory and practice.

High School Proficiency Testing

By fall of 1992, as president of the Michigan Council, I was again busily preparing for the annual state conference. Again, however, with no warning my busy routine was interrupted. In this case, MCTE would play an even more important role.

Actually it took some time to realize fully what was going on. I began to get rather urgent phone calls from leaders of other state organizations, such as the Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Michigan Reading Association. They wanted to know what I knew about the Michigan high school proficiency test. Eventually it sunk in that the Michigan Council of Teachers of English was going to be asked to bid on a contract to develop the framework for the writing component of the proficiency test.

Had our voices been heard on the teacher competency issue when we had insisted we knew how authentic assessment should be done? I think so. When the four content organizations (representing math, English, science, and reading) met with the State Superintendent for Public Instruction, we sensed that he was saying in effect, “If you think you can do it better, here’s your chance. Now show us.”

On the issue of high-stakes testing, however, we were less sure about the right course to take. Sheila Fitzgerald, past president of both MCTE and NCTE, reminded us that in a time of shrinking financial resources, surely the State had better uses for its money than to spend it on yet another test. Surely adding a new hurdle for high school graduation would not be in all students’ and teachers’ best interests. The leaders of the four organizations seriously considered a joint effort to fight the statewide testing. We appeared at a State Board of Education meeting and each expressed our fears about developing high-stakes testing.

On the other hand, the proficiency test legislation had already been enacted, and an expert panel report had already been written about its implementation. We knew that if we refused to participate, we would have a harder time later criticizing whatever the testing companies produced. Finally, each organization’s board made the very big decision to draw up a curricular framework and assessment plan.

Day by day a variety of decisions had to be made—how to write the proposal responding to the State’s RFP (Request for Proposals), how to project a budget for the $40,000 contract we anticipated receiving, how to enlist quickly a wide range of educators from around the state for the project’s management team and advisory committee. As project manager, I learned fast not to apologize when I needed information or advice, and by early January the proposal was submitted and the committee members were ready to meet. We set a schedule of weekend meetings, mindful of an incredibly tight timeline, since the framework document was due to the Department of Education by the end of March. Then we settled in for what we thought might be the least difficult part of the process—discussing how writing is taught and learned in Michigan and determining what our assessment recommendations would be. We were charged specifically not to develop a minimum competency test and not to recommend only multiple-choice items. We were strongly encouraged to include performance assessment. As composition specialists and classroom teachers of writing, we knew that performance assessment was exactly what we would recommend and that we could depend on the well-established validity of large-scale writing assessment.

The frustration came, however, in struggling to include more than quick writing in isolation to a few prompts. As it turned out, the psychometricians and attorneys who worked with us were generally uncomfortable with performance assessment and kept reminding us of past court cases, as if the future had to be shaped primarily by what had been legally defensible in the past. What we eventually recommended—two pieces of writing produced in a controlled setting, one piece composed in a semi-controlled setting, and two pieces from classroom portfolios to be
counted but not scored—is a subject for another article. Now that we have managed to produce the final documents, we can catch our breath and wonder about the future. The Writing Framework will be disseminated for public review around the state and then submitted for approval by the State Board of Education. Although we’ve been assured that we will be involved in the test development process, we still worry about who will do what with our recommendations.

Regardless of what eventually occurs, however, we believe that our involvement in the framework project has produced a number of positive outcomes:

1. Although we know how frequently bad things happen to good ideas, we believe that writing will be taken more seriously in Michigan by students, teachers, administrators, and parents if it is assessed at the state level. We hope we have designed an assessment plan that is worth teaching to.

2. We have learned the difference between working informally with the State and having a contractual agreement with them. The $40,000 contract gave MCTE control over how the money would be spent, who would be involved, and how the project would be carried out. Although countless hours of time were donated by everyone involved in the project, the contract not only covered project expenses but also allowed for buying some of the project manager’s time.

3. During February we conducted nine site meetings around the state to discuss early drafts of the curriculum framework and assessment plan. These meetings gave teachers an opportunity to be involved and to re-think how writing is taught and learned and assessed. We were happy to be able to include even teachers from the remote upper peninsula, who seldom feel they have a voice in what happens “downstate.”

4. We have developed and strengthened relationships with other content organizations in the state—the Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Michigan Reading Association, and Michigan Science Teachers Association—as we met for occasional strategy sessions. We anticipate future occasions when such links will be important.

5. We have also formed links with leaders from several state business and professional organizations—such as the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, parents’ groups, and special educators—since we are all members of the newly-formed Superintendent’s Advisory Committee for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. We have become more visible as content area experts interested in a broad range of issues.

**Making a Difference**

As we worked on both the teacher competency issue and on the writing framework project, we had long theoretical discussions and frequently disagreed on one point or another. Along the way, however, we kept reminding ourselves of the one point on which there was complete agreement—that our most important task was to serve as advocates for literacy learners. This was especially true once we discovered that legislation can be enacted by lawmakers who seem relatively unaware of the implications of what they mandate. The need for MCTE to be more proactive as well as reactive is clear.

When professional organizations like MCTE are faced with important issues, sometimes the big decisions—those made by board members sitting in meetings—are actually the easiest ones to make. Often the small, individual decisions based on personal and professional insight and commitment are more difficult to make but just as important. Too often, I believe, English language arts teachers are inclined to assume that others are the experts. One of our most important discoveries was that statewide projects call for a wide range of individual talents and expertise. We realized as we worked through our long sessions that the perspective and effort of every one of us involved was needed if we were to make a positive difference.
On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher

Jennifer Ochoa

(Originally published: Fall 1994: 53-57)

I am a bookaholic. I go to book sales and buy 15 or 20 books at a time. I like “great literature” and trashy romances. I like murder mysteries and modern novels. I like books for little kids and I like books of poetry. I don’t really like self-help books or informational books, but I buy them anyway—I might like them someday. I would love to own a bookstore so that I could be surrounded by books all day long.

I still have my first raggedy, torn copy of So Big. I can imagine when that book was store-bought new, probably a 35-cent grocery store purchase. I can also imagine my much younger mother, holding the tiny me in pink-footed pajamas, creaking open the brand new Golden Book, So Big. My mother’s voice accompanies my memory-picture—she begins, “Look at baby. She is SO BIG!” This is when I started to read.

My mom used to read to me all of the time. To me, her voice is the sound of reading. When we read together, she always maintained a running commentary about the story, pointing out interesting pictures or asking questions about my interpretations or predictions. She showed me that reading was an active past-time that I could become involved in. She taught me that I could think about the story and figure out what was going to happen. And she invited me to see the words on the page as more than just words; they were the paint that colored the pictures the story drew in my mind.

I don’t remember the moments when the letters on the pages began to form recognizable words in my head, but I do remember “reading” before that point. I crowded my dolls and animals around me and read to them the same books my mom read to me. I repeated the words she used to narrate each picture, imitating her intonations and inflections. I even remember questioning and commenting as my mother did, only I answered the questions myself. Reading was something I did in my play time, just like my mom.

When I was five, I begged my mother to “teach me to read!” I thought reading was some magical ability, and I wanted to possess it. My mom is an elementary school teacher, so she brought home some “Dick and Jane” classics for me to practice reading from. One afternoon, the two of us sat together to begin to go through the books. I hated them. Who cared if Dick and Jane could run? And why did they call their mom “mother”? Those books made for very boring stories. My mom didn’t understand, I wanted to READ—like she read, the way she read, the stories she read. And I wanted to be able to do it NOW! I didn’t want anything to do with those dumb old big-lettered books she brought me; I wanted to be able to know what the letters in my storybooks meant. The project was instantly abandoned and Dick and Jane were saved for an even better use—“playing school.”

Reading and writing did not come together in my life until much later, but my dad is responsible for my writing. My dad is not much of a writer, and would never claim responsibility for my early writing efforts which did not even include using pencil and paper. These were explorations in finding a creative voice, and in this sense my dad was my mentor. My daddy told me stories all the time. These stories exist in my sense memory. They feel warm because I was always tucked in when he told them. They look dark and shadowy because he told me stories after he turned out the lights. I see his stories against the flickering TV light that was outside my bedroom door. My daddy’s stories are soft and whispy like he made his voice, and they smell like my dad smells. But mostly these stories feel safe because even if they became scary at points, my daddy was there telling them and creating the safe endings to please my anxious little-kid imagination.

Through his tales, my dad showed me how to write stories in my head. He taught me storytelling. I used my dad’s stories as examples for stories I created myself. His stories showed me how stories should sound, that the way words are put together make sentences which express ideas that relate to plot, action, and character. He showed me that describing the way things “look” in a story is very important so that my audience can actually “see” where action occurs. From this “apprenticeship,” I began telling stories of my own. I told them to the eager and willing audience of my dolls, to myself, and eventually, to my friends. I would make up wild tales as the neighborhood kids and I sat on my front porch. After I gave the gist of the story, we would “play” my stories, acting out the events I had detailed. As we played, I would continue to revise, essentially rewriting the drama. I would twist plots and action in different ways, and I would
With the advent of school, reading was still important in my life, as was imagining, but I never associated my storybooks and neighborhood-kid melodramas with the reading groups and book reports for school. We wrote short stories in third grade and poetry in sixth grade—I did a fair job at both. And I was always in the highest reading group, whatever the grade, but these were not important events in my life; they were merely the stuff school was made of. As I progressed as a student, junior high school marked the beginning of my love/hate relationship with writing. It was there that my stories became a chore, a task that was demanded of me. My stories no longer belonged to after-school play hours. They belonged to my teachers and became part of my grade, but I felt like they didn’t belong to me.

In junior high school, I was always in special English classes for accelerated readers and writers. Great things were expected of our accelerated minds, and in turn, great and wonderful English activities were presented by our teacher. However, we diminished the importance of her English teacher assignments by looking at them as mere dribble to put up with. We were smart and we were fourteen; we had no need for assignments. One of the things we had to do was keep a weekly journal. I wrote in a personal journal daily, with strict regularity. I wrote about many important things, like who I liked and who liked my friends. My personal journal also included anguished poems. I wrote about the loss of love and unrequited (a new vocabulary word) love. It was much more real than the journal we had to keep for English class. That journal had assigned topics. That journal was for a grade.

My teacher always commented in my journal about my fine writing skills. I never paid attention, and continued to pump writings out in the nick of time to meet the deadline. I never worked very hard at my school journal or any writing that was for school. I liked my journal at home, and my verbose (another vocabulary word) poetry. I was simply a student in Advanced English class; I was a writer at home.

One of the journal assignments at school was to write a piece—a poem, story, essay, whatever we chose—to enter into the Scholastic Writing Awards Contest. Yeah, yeah, Sunday night before journals were due, I slopped out a story to satisfy the assignment. This story changed my entire view of myself in terms of writing and became my connection between reading and writing.

When my teacher returned my journal, the only note beside my story read, “Good job! Revise and type for entry to contest.” At that point in my life, revising meant rewriting my rough draft in ink, and since I was typing the story for entry, there was no need for my usual revision. I sort of fixed spelling and grammar errors, typed it and sent it off. I was fairly surprised when the letter declaring my story was a “finalist” arrived, but I didn’t give it a second thought. A month after the finalist letter arrived, my teacher came running into my social studies class where we were having a test on World War II screaming, “You did it! You did it!” And she hugged me. I was quite shocked, more because my usually undemonstrative, “all business” type teacher was screaming in school than because I won the contest. It was also hard to believe that my stupid little story won out of more than 10,000 entries in my category. All I could think of was that I certainly didn’t deserve this; the small-town fame that accompanied the event was equally as strange.

When the issue of the magazine containing my story arrived, I had a profound experience. I remember very clearly looking at the magazine-print version of my story next to the scribbled journal version. The words written in my fat, round-ed handwriting were the same as the professional magazine print. And these words came from my head. And other people would read these words who would never know that I was the person who wrote them. The one comment I remember most distinctly amidst the “Congratulations” and the “terrific jobs” was the one made by my little Mexican, broken-English-speaking grandma. She asked, “How can you just put those words together and make them come out like that?” I honestly didn’t know, but I did know one thing. Expectations came with this supposed triumph, expectations I did not want to fulfill. That is when I began to hate writing.

Tenth grade brought me to composition class. Yuck! I could not comprehend the triangles and rectangles my teacher drew on the board. The five-paragraph essay was beyond my reach, and I hated the looks I got from teachers. Questioning looks that mixed pity with dismay. Looks that said, “She’s supposed to be great, what happened?” What happened was
I hated writing. I didn’t like doing it for myself anymore, and I certainly wasn’t going to do it for my teachers. I didn’t like my own writing, and I didn’t understand what they were asking me to write. I took the minimalist approach and barely got C’s.

I sure did love reading, though. I read everything I could, in all the time I could spare. So I came to college, and I appropriately chose English as a major. I was an avid reader of books. I had no time to read, and was a writer of last-minute papers. I did not keep a journal for personal satisfaction—my scorn for writing had become complete. However, when I came to college and the five-paragraph essay ceased to exist, writing fell into place for me. I could go on for three pages explaining my point. I still hated writing, but my writing got me 4.0’s, so I trudged along, writing papers as my payment so that reading could be my major. I tried to make the activity of writing as entertaining as I could, so I played games with words. I forgot terms like “thesis” or “topic sentence,” and instead tried to find the most interesting combination of words to say the most ordinary things. I still didn’t revise, and I still composed in the absolute last minutes available, but I didn’t feel as much hatred towards the concept of writing. I didn’t consider myself a writer, though. I did, however, realize that writing came naturally to me.

At this time, I realized that there was a connection between the early storytelling lessons of my father and whatever I wanted to write down. I understood that writing was as simple as putting the words that I spoke onto the page with my pen. At this time, I realized the connection between the combined gifts of my mother’s reading and my father’s telling. When I read, I heard my mother’s voice reading the words to me, and now, when I wrote, I heard my own voice speaking the words as they were recorded in ink. So for me, reading and writing start as oral activities.

Although I loved reading and writing for myself, I did not always want to be a teacher. Being an English major teaches you to read books and write papers on them. Since the job market is not filled with positions demanding these qualifications, I became a teacher. I could not wait to be an English teacher. I wanted to help students discover themselves as readers and writers. I wanted to help these readers and writers appreciate and find the tremendous versatility and beauty in words and what can be created with words. I developed ideas and methods that would help students become writers of good writing—writing not stilted and stifled by a teacher’s authoritarian red pen—but writing that comes from a student’s own natural voice.

I believe that composing is an activity that needs to be taught because a piece needs to be written with the thought that it will be read. Readers should also be helped to understand that books are written by people who create the ideas and word combinations in their heads. I think, therefore, that students should be taught that these same readers can became writers of what other people read. Emerging writers should be given confidence in their ability to produce good writing and be given guidance towards that end. Beginning writers should not be weighted down with unfair expectations about their ability, either positive or negative. If a student does not possess mature writing skills, that student should be afforded opportunities to succeed without having to meet a teacher’s expectations of failure. Likewise, a student who shows some promising writing skills, as I did, should not be pushed or expected to perform continually. Beginning writers need latitude to find their own unique voice, and I think teachers should accept that voice.

I do not believe a prescribed formula for writing is appropriate or even possible. Every writer has a different process of composition, and reading and writing have different definitions in everyone’s mind. What needs to be given to writers is the help to find a process that they can work with comfortably to produce quality writing of all kinds. Reading also should be included as part of the writing process. Had I never seen my own writing in print, I never would have associated it with reading. Thus the stories my dad told me were just as much a guide in my road to literacy and writing as the stories my mother read.

One of the clearest lessons teachers can present to students to show that reading and writing are valuable activities is to read and write themselves. If students see teachers reading, especially for pleasure, they will see that reading is an activity used for more than just school purposes. And if they see teachers writing, students will better understand that it is an activity that is done for reasons other than just “getting a grade.” Only through these kinds of demonstrations can students see reading and writing as valuable beyond the classroom. I also think teachers should model the writing process through their own writing. Once students have experienced this kind of guidance from teachers, they can then explore the writing process themselves. After teachers offer students their own models of reading and writing processes, they can allow
students to explore their own variations and differences in approaching these processes.

Formulas teachers give beginning writers often make no sense and have no meaning in the real world of writing. Since the real world is where students need to survive, it seems to make sense to prepare them for it. Readers and writers are born by being shown that reading and writing are worthwhile activities and they become good at these activities only by doing them. Good English teachers know the difference between helping students become readers and writers and teaching the mechanics of reading and writing.
In 1996, I resigned from a high school position in Ohio to become an English professor at Central Michigan University. Having spent over ten years in the classroom (including the ENG 101 classroom, as a GA at Ohio State), the new teaching role wasn’t entirely foreign; even so, CMU was new territory, and LAJM eased the transition. In particular, I recall assigning LAJM articles to composition methods students and recruiting graduate students to submit articles (two practices I continue). In addition, LAJM immediately became a productive venue for my own scholarship. In short, LAJM has played a crucial role in my professional life from the “get-go” at CMU.

Selecting three articles from 1995-99 (my “get-go” years at CMU) was a pleasure. I began with Marcy Taylor’s “Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle” (5.2 [Fall 1999]: 72-76) because its premise is so insightful. Working in reverse chronological order, I then selected Diana Mitchell’s “50+ Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom” (14.1 [Spring 1998]: 60-65) because it represents a helpful type of LAJM article in the 90s. Last, I wanted to showcase the work of Gregory Shafer, so I selected “On the Importance of Writing with Students” (12.2 [Fall 1996]: 26-29). Shafer has consistently published many wonderful teaching narratives, which arguably represent some of the best articles LAJM has to offer.

**Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle**

Marcy Taylor

One of many “professional book reviews” routinely published in LAJM, Marcy Taylor’s “Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle” is a review essay of Nancie Atwell’s In the Middle, 2nd edition (1998). Her primary purpose, then, is to introduce and analyze this text, and she does provide substantive and detailed overviews of the major sections and appendices; however, it’s Taylor’s approach and claims that make the review essay so interesting. In particular, Taylor contextualizes the 2nd edition of In the Middle within the first edition, proposing that Atwell’s shift to “teach with a capital T” and balance writing workshop pedagogy reflects a similar shift in the field of composition.

Taylor begins with the personal, acknowledging she started her career as an 8th grade English teacher in 1987 (the publishing date for the first edition of In the Middle), and then continuing until her present-day composition/English education position at CMU. During this ten-year span, Taylor (and then Taylor and her students) read In the Middle and learned the “promise of process” didn’t always live up to the realities of the real-life students, classrooms, and teachers.

...I needed a writing pedagogy that acknowledged that even if a teacher creates an environment of student-centered choice and collaboration, student may choose not to engage. I needed a pedagogy that recognized the very real constraints teachers struggle with...that must be balanced with their desire to widen the possibilities for reading and writing in school. I needed a pedagogy that fit with my philosophy of teacher education—that teachers need to be reflective practitioners who are informed, authoritative, and planful. Frankly, Atwell’s In the Middle wasn’t working. (72)

Just when Taylor was about to dismiss In the Middle as “a relic of the past” (72), Atwell published her second edition. According to Taylor, the most important change in the new edition is the English teacher’s role. Whereas Atwell originally advocates for a hands-off approach (granting students complete choice in writing workshops), she currently proposes “teaching with a capital T” by intervening in students’ writing processes. This intervention includes, for example, creating curricula, making assignments, requiring genres, establishing workshop procedures, providing specific revision suggestions, and conducting evaluations—in short, a major pedagogical shift for Atwell, but one Taylor claims (citing Tobin and Lensmire) is typical of current composition scholarship and pedagogy. Despite the shift, one crucial similarity between the two editions remains: Atwell claims that writing teachers must be writers. However, teachers are encouraged in solely the second edition to own their writerly expertise/authority and share it with students by demonstration or direct teaching.
Marcy Taylor’s review might dismay “early process purists,” especially those with limited 6-12 classroom experience; however, current teachers will appreciate Taylor’s substantive overview of In the Middle and her provocative claims regarding Atwell’s pedagogical shift.

50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom
Diana Mitchell
As its title implies, Diana Mitchell’s “50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom” is a compilation of fifty mini-reviews of YA novels, in this case published from 1993-98. Each review begins with the author, book title, publishing house/date, and page number, continues with the heart of the review—a one-paragraph overview—and ends with codes identifying appropriate grade level and classroom use. Here is a good example:

Hobbs, Will. Far North. Avon Books, 1996. 216 pages. Gabe moves to the Northwest Territory to go to school so he can be close to his dad. One weekend, he has the opportunity to fly over the area to take in its beauty. He’s surprised to see that the other two passengers are Raymond, his roommate from school, who has decided to give school up and return home and an old man from Raymond’s village. The pilot sets the plane down so they can have a closer look at the spectacular, thundering falls, and then the engine won’t start. The pilot is swept away down the river, and Raymond, Gabe, and the old man begin their desperate struggle to survive the harsh Northwest winter. Action-packed, adventurous, and involving. 8-12 s/i. (62)

Mitchell arranges the reviews alphabetically by author’s last name, and the novels collectively represent a range of characters, conflicts, and settings. As the overview of Far North suggests, the reviews feature enticing, but primarily objective, descriptions of each book’s major conflict; however, Mitchell—an “MCTE Brick House” and lover of YA novels—understandably slips into book-talk mode from time to time.

I thought [Chicago Blues] rang true. The children of alcoholics are shown in realistic ways, not being able to trust what the mother promises but wanting to believe her desperately. Also, the roles the sisters take is consistent with what I know of alcoholic children. (60-61)

In other reviews, Mitchell shares similar reflections: “Complex, compelling, I found [Mr. Was] impossible to put down” (62). “I loved [Belle Pater’s Boy]” (65).

One of several mini-review compilations by Diana Mitchell during the 90’s, “50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom” is a goldmine. After all, what teacher has time to read fifty new YA novels every few years? For such sustained professional activity, there aren’t enough minutes during lunch, hours over a weekend, or days in summer—not even for the most enthusiastic teacher. Enter Mitchell. Her reviews help teachers survey a broad range of YA novels in the time it takes to enjoy a mug of coffee or a cup of tea. That’s good news for teachers—and students!

On the Importance of Writing with Students
Gregory Shafer
Gregory Shafer’s “On the Importance of Writing with Students” tells a good story. In it, he confesses he knows teachers should write with their students, but time is tight (as all LAJM readers know), so Shafer seldom does—until he assigns a spooky story, which his 11th graders encourage him to write too. He good naturedly agrees but, by participating in the responding, drafting and revising activities, does far more than generate a ghost story; he forges new and more democratic relationships with students and, in turn, becomes more sensitive to their needs as writers.

“On the Importance of Writing with Students” is an excellent read, and it’s typical of several LAJM articles Shafer has written. By perusing one of his articles, LAJM readers have a window into a specific classroom on a specific day (or series of days,) and they witness Shafer teaching: explaining an assignment, participating in peer reviews, or conversing with students. Though not developed like storybook characters, these students are referred to by first names, and Shafer constructs their comments as quotes, enhancing the “window into the classroom” sensation. Further, Shafer’s narratives always have a clear beginning, middle, and ending, and self-explanatory section headings helpfully divide the text into manageable portions. Last, Shafer contextualizes his narratives within scholarship by making connections with the work of (among others) Paulo Freire, Don Murray, and Ira Shor.

LAJM readers will see the value in Gregory Shafer’s “On the Importance of Writing with Students” because its message rings true: We should write with our students. Equally important, though, the article portrays a single teacher in the act of teaching writing in an attempt to improve his craft and his students’ literacy development. What more could one ask of an LAJM article?
Atwell’s Writing Workshop: Discovery and Discontent

I began teaching middle school English in 1987, the year Nancie Atwell published the first edition of *In the Middle*. Needless to say, during those first tough years of becoming a teacher, I never read the book—who had time amid making sense of the district-mandated curricula, reading the required literary texts in the required anthologies and designing tests and writing assignments to go along with them, grading spelling tests (again, required as part of the 8th grade curriculum), and, of course, coaching girls basketball and organizing the talent show? I didn’t know what “writing workshop” was, only gradually becoming aware of the philosophies that informed Atwell’s practice by attending the NCTE state-affiliated conferences, participating in the area Writing Project summer workshops, and taking graduate courses. Through these experiences, I was “converted” to the promise of workshop methodology in the K-12 classroom—the promise of relinquishing control over what gets read and written so that students could make their own literate choices; the promise of participating as a listener and co-learner rather than an assigner and assessor; and the promise of working delicately and collaboratively with writers rather than barging furiously (alone) through their writings. And Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle* was the Bible showing me the light of salvation.

But, as Atwell herself argues, “kids can’t be the only learners in a classroom. I also had to learn. Common sense, good intentions, wide reading, and the world’s best writing programs aren’t enough” (In the Middle List ed.) 8. I’ve tried to learn about composition in the last ten years or so of teaching writing and studying my own classrooms and those of others, I began to read composition research by such teacher-researchers as Linda Rief, Timothy Lensmire and Lad Tobin, who critique and revise workshop pedagogy. I conducted a two-year study on adolescent literacy in an urban, alternative middle school, seeing first-hand how Atwell’s writing workshop methodology served and failed to serve the specific teacher and student roles in that environment. Finally, I began teaching a writing methods course in which my preservice teachers also felt the same disorientation with workshop pedagogy. Although the reading they were doing (including our primary text, Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Writing* and selections from *In the Middle*) sounded wonderfully free and promised a different relationship to literacy than many of them experienced as elementary students, they begin to have doubts once they enter elementary writing workshops. As Timothy Lensmire points out, in his wonderful ethnography of a third-grade writing workshop, “Writing workshop advocates such as Donald Graves [1983], Lucy Calkins (1986), and Donald Murray 11968] tend to tell success stories” (2); but what are we teachers to do when our own experiences in workshops are not successful? Based on these experiences, I gradually became less the born-again workshop proponent and more the heretic: Does writing workshop pedagogy really do all that *In the Middle* seems to promise? What does it mean to be a “writing teacher” in this model? Am I doing something wrong if the “miracles” that Calkins and Atwell describe don’t happen? How has/can the writing workshop change in the years since *In the Middle* came out?

In short, I needed a writing pedagogy that acknowledged that even if a teacher creates an environment of student-centered choice and collaboration, students may choose not to engage. I needed a pedagogy that recognized the very real constraints teachers struggle with—district mandated curricula, achievement testing, widely-varying student abilities, assigning grades—that must be balanced with their desire to widen the possibilities for reading and writing in schools. I needed a pedagogy that fit with my philosophy of teacher education—that teachers need to be reflective practitioners who are informed, authoritative, and planful. Frankly, Atwell’s *In the Middle* wasn’t working. Just as I was ready to abandon the work of Nancie Atwell as being a relic of an earlier, uncomplicated view of writing and writing process pedagogy, she publishes a new edition that promises to answer some of these questions. Her revised pedagogy—which I would describe in her phrase as “teaching with a capital T”—offers a balanced view of workshop that reintegrates the teacher as a central figure in the writing classroom without returning to a programmed, “traditional” (and therefore, oppressive) pedagogy. While building on the strengths of her earlier work—those features that made *In the Middle* so revolutionary and compelling—her second edition is worth reading not only because she has modified (and, in
my opinion, revitalized) our conception of writing workshop, but also because the text can serve as an indicator of how our field has evolved during the ‘90s.

Revising Workshop Pedagogy: The New Edition of Atwell’s In the Middle

Section One, aptly entitled “Always Beginning,” outlines Atwell’s theoretical positions. Chapter One, “Learning How to Teach Writing,” describes the evolution of Atwell’s writing workshop, taking the story of her transformation into a workshop proponent that she told in the beginning of the first edition and adding her transformations since publishing the first edition. Atwell argues that her earlier version of writing workshop was a necessary liberation, a “revolution,” “But,” she argues, “something happened to me that happens often in revolutions. As part of my transformation I embraced a whole new set of orthodoxies. As enlightened and child-centered as the new rules were, they had an effect similar to the old ones: they limited what I did as an English teacher, but from a different angle” (17). This second edition is her attempt to show specifically how she has broken free of these “orthodoxies,” in the process creating not only a very different version of the writing teacher than we see in the earlier edition, but also managing to provide more practical and detailed explanation of pedagogy while avoiding what she calls “the formulas and jargon that made it possible to read the first edition of In the Middle as a cookbook: one teacher’s collection of recipes for whipping up a writing workshop” (16).

In the second edition, Atwell highlights the developments in her thinking “about my role as a teacher in the workshop and new questions for the sleepless nights in August” (22). I am struck by how much these questions resemble those that my colleagues, my preservice teachers, and I have been asking over the past few years:

• When do assignments from a teacher who writes help young writers engage and grow?

• What else can happen in minilessons besides me minilecturing?

• How do I talk to-and collaborate with- kids in conferences so that I’m showing them how to act on their intentions, not hoping they can find their own way on their own?

• How important are specific expectations for productivity and experimentation? What should I ask young writers to produce over the course of a year, in terms of quantity and range of genres?

• How do I teach about genre without trotting out tired old English-teacher clichés that don’t get to the heart of what makes good fiction or poetry or exposition?

• What behaviors do I want to see in the workshop? How do I encourage them? Which should be mandated?

• How and when do I demonstrate my own knowledge of writing? To what ends? (23)

These questions illustrate the shift in Atwell’s thinking: as she says, she has become a “teacher with a capital T,” as opposed to, say, teacher as “facilitator” or “coach,” metaphors which seemed to dominate early process literature. These questions are so striking because they clearly interrogate the most well-known maxims of the first edition, such as “Don’t look at or read students’ writing during conferences,” “Don’t tell writers what they should do or what should be in their writing,” and “Tell kids editorial issues don’t matter until the final draft” (21d ed. 17). In the rest of this introductory chapter, she briefly outlines these changes: she does assign writing sometimes; minilessons vary more-in length and form; and conferences are more specific—she is more straightforward in her approach to kids (telling them what do to and what her expectations are). Besides shifts in her thinking about her role as writing teacher, she has also redefined student responsibilities, She describes her expectations at the end of this opening chapter: “As their teacher with a capital T, I also expect students to experiment with specific genres, attempt professional publication, produce minimum pages of draft each week and finished pieces each trimester (Rief 1992), attend to conventions as they draft, take notes on minilessons (Rief 1992), be quiet, and work as hard in writing workshop as I do” (25).

While I have been highlighting the theoretical shift represented by Atwell’s opening section, I don’t want to give the impression that the practical suggestions of the first
edition are lost in the second. After Atwell explains her new theoretical underpinnings in Section One, she moves on to more practical concerns in Sections Two (“Writing and Reading Workshop”) and Section Three (“Teaching with a Capital T”). This edition is even more practically useful than the first, primarily because Atwell has had over ten years to refine her pedagogy, collect student work to illustrate it, and write numerous books and articles articulating it. Teachers want practical advice and demonstrations—just what beginning writers want!—and Atwell doesn’t disappoint us in this second edition. What she says of herself as a teacher of writing could also be said of her as a teacher of teachers of writing (substitute “teaching” or “teacher” for “writing” or “writer” in the following quote): In her refined pedagogy, she wants to serve “as a mentor of writing, a mediator of writing strategies, and a model of a writer at work” (21). In Sections Two and Three of the new edition, Atwell serves as mentor, mediator and model.

It is these two sections that are the most different organizationally from the first edition. Whereas in the first edition Atwell had separate sections devoted to “Writing Workshop” and “Reading Workshop,” with a tiny third section (“Connecting Writing and Reading”), here Atwell integrates reading and writing workshop in Section Two, using six chapters that cover the elements and the implementation of reading and writing workshops. Atwell describes her purpose in the opening of Chapter Four (“Getting Ready”): “The workshop isn’t an add-on; it is the English course—here, everything that can be described as language arts is taught as sensibly as it can be taught, in the context of whole pieces of students’ writing and whole literary works” (97). While the ideal of choice is still a major value in her pedagogy—for instance, in her chapter entitled “Making the Best of Adolescence,” she waxes rhapsodic about the wonderful things that happen when adolescents “can choose”—there is much more of a sense of teacher direction and expectation in this edition. I think that the unpredictability and chaos allowed for by the somewhat utopian devotion to student choice is exactly what teachers reacted against in the earlier version, particularly new teachers looking for something visible and measurable. If one weren’t a magical teacher (as we assumed Atwell was), one couldn’t pull off the program she described. One of the most useful changes in this edition, then, is the great amount of detail with which Atwell spells out her expectations and rules for behavior in the workshop, along with the addition of a very detailed description of the notebooks, folders, handouts and record-keeping strategies she uses in her workshop. While Atwell argues that she doesn’t want this book to serve as a “recipe” for workshop, there is the sense that a teacher could take these elements as a starting point and play around with the ingredients to achieve a program with his or her own unique flavor.

In addition to the benefits of integration and specificity in this section, Atwell also has chosen to add two new chapters—one devoted to minilessons and one to evaluation—and they are wonderfully detailed. I use the minilessons chapter in its entirety in my writing methods course to show the range of strategies one can teach in minilessons (for each type of minilesson, Atwell includes a long list of possible topics, very useful particularly for the preservice or first-year teacher). Her shifts in thinking regarding directing writers more and using her authority as an expert writer/reader has influenced her choice to elaborate this section on minilessons the part of the workshop where whole-class, direct teaching takes place. She says that since writing the first edition, she has “reconceptualize[d] the minilesson as a practice that serves many purposes” (150)—as a forum for sharing her authority and as a forum for establishing a communal frame of reference, for students to share what they know. So, you will notice that not only is she more specific about the strategies and topics of minilessons, but she also no longer sees them as constrained to 3-5 minute minilectures; they are longer and more interactive, The other addition is the chapter entitled “Valuing and Evaluating” (perhaps following the lead of Linda Rief in Seeking Diversity [19921). Again, by creating a separate chapter on evaluation, Atwell is able to go into more detail than in the first edition. Evaluation is a reality of public school teaching, yet workshop proponents have been tellingly reticent about discussing it. For example, my preservice elementary teachers complain mightily about the way that Calkins (1994) manages to discuss assessment without ever mentioning actually assigning grades. Atwell provides some help in this area (although a teacher/teacher-to-be will still have to translate her advice about using portfolios and self-evaluation to determine the degree of progress students make toward their goals into an actual letter-grade on a report card).

Section Three, entitled “Teaching with a Capital T,” is brand new and extremely useful in answering the question but what does It mean to intervene In students’ writing development? Here, Atwell includes chapters on direct teaching: she has chapters on demonstrating writing and on ways of reading and writing specific genres (memoir,
fiction, poetry, and nonfiction). Here, Atwell makes perhaps the central point of her new book: as teachers of writing, we have to be writers ourselves; as experienced writers, we have to discover ways of showing students how we go through the process of making the choices writers make. Atwell argues:

We need to find ways to reveal to students what adult, experienced writers do—to reclaim the tradition of demonstration that allows young people to apprentice themselves to grown-ups. Observing adults as they work is an activity of enormous worth and power when it illumines what is possible. When we, as English teachers, demonstrate the uses of writing in our lives, we answer the most important question of all about writing: Why would anyone want to write? We give our students another taste of the complexities and satisfactions of composing a life. (369)

That is, rather than simply creating the perfect environment for writing to happen, we also have to make it happen by offering our expertise (gained through experience and through research). Each chapter in this section contains practical, accessible ways of talking about the considerations and decisions of writers (and a large number of resource materials for us teachers to use to research on our own). This section allows us to extend our understanding of what we are to do as “mentors, mediators, and models.”

The final section is the Appendices. Atwell has expanded this section as well, providing more inclusive lists of ideas for publication, genres, and materials for the writing workshop. Three features distinguish this set of Appendices from the first:

1) Rather than “manifestos” based on the very local conditions of Boothbay (see Appendices I and J in the first edition)- Atwell includes resources, allowing for a more inclusive and more conditional sense of “what works” that teachers will discover as they use and adapt the material to their own specific needs. She provides a wider range of “forms” and “handouts” that she uses to organize students work and to facilitate evaluation. Forms such as Appendix D: Writing Survey Appendix a Reading Survey, and Appendix F: Student Writing Record can be used as “pull-outs,” which is why the copyright information appears printed at the bottom of each individual form;

2) Rather than a list of Atwell’s “Top 10 YA Titles” (see Appendix G: Favorite Adolescent Literature in the first edition), in the second, she has greatly expanded this list, splitting it into Appendix L: Favorite Adolescent Literature and Appendix M: Favorite Collections of Poetry;

3) Finally the most important addition to the Appendices is Appendix Q: Recommended Resources for Teachers of Middle School Writing, Reading, and Literature, which includes professional literature, grouped by topic, for teachers to explore as references. This addition signals Atwell’s commitment to literacy research and to teachers’ ongoing professional development.

The Appendices as a whole offer very detailed examples to illustrate the theories Atwell develops in the body of the text. While not as extensive as Rid’s or Routman’s, they do provide the kind of “practical application” of concepts that teachers at all levels will find enormously helpful in conceptualizing ways to make workshop pedagogy concrete.

Because this issue of LAJM is devoted to writing instruction, and because I am a writing specialist, I am concentrating in this review on In the Middle as a writing text. However, as the cover states, the second edition contains “more than 70% new material,” including discussion of reading workshops and the integration of her writing and reading program. Like her shifts in the writing program, over time Atwell began to make changes in her reading program. In the introductory chapter, “Learning How to Teach Reading,” she says that she began to feel that students were eating the same meal over and over again: “I saw that getting students to read well and love books was one thing, If they were to grow beyond enthusiasm and use literature as a prism for viewing and participating in the adult world, I had to figure out how to inspire them to higher, deeper purposes” (45). For my writing methods course, I tend to pick and choose sections of the book that deal specifically with writing workshop; this was easier to do in the first edition, where Atwell tended to separate the reading and writing in distinct chapters (as I mention earlier in this review). However, by blending reading and writing workshop techniques in this edition, Atwell demonstrates the reality of middle school English classrooms, and she represents a more complicated, balanced view of teaching the language arts.
Balancing Act: writing workshop in the New Millenium

This notion of balance is the primary value Atwell’s new edition offers. It is a productive metaphor for rethinking our roles as writing teachers, an act that this special issue of LAJM encourages. At the end of his study of 3rd grade writing workshops, Lensmire summarizes what he learned:

What I have struggled to express here is what my students and I struggled for in the writing workshop: some sort of balance. We must recognize that children need room to talk and act in order to learn and develop. We must also recognize that children’s talk and actions can be turned to worthy and less worthy ends, and that as teachers we have the responsibility to push for worthy ones. (159)

This sense of intervention marks the key philosophical shift in Atwell’s thinking and one of the main reasons why returning to Atwell’s In the Middle is so important. It recognizes that teaching writing always involves the “responsibility to push for worthy [ends],” as Atwell states in her article “Cultivating Our Garden”: “That I teach what matters to me may seem the most obvious declaration ever made by a teacher, except that not so long ago I wanted to view English teaching as a value-neutral act. My goal in writing and reading workshop was to downplay my tastes under the misapprehension that this was how students would discover their own” (47). Atwell has created a way to balance student discovery with her own responsibility to shape and guide that discovery. In perhaps the most direct statement of her revised role, Atwell argues, “Bottom line, what [students] need is a Teacher. Today I’m striving for the fluid, subtle, exhilarating balance that allows me to function in my classroom as a listener and a teller, an observer and an actor, a collaborator and a critic and a cheerleader” (21).

In the introduction to Taking Stock: The Writing Process Movement In the ’90s, Lad Tobin writes that “the history of composition is still written primarily through the stories we tell. Stories about the dreadful ways writing was taught—or not taught—when ‘we were in school’; stories about the miraculous changes brought about by the writing process movement; and, lately, stories about how some of those changes may not have been so miraculous after all” (1). As we approach the 21st century, language arts teachers at all levels (preservice elementary and secondary teachers through college-level instructors) should reflect on these stories of
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50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom

Diana Mitchell

(Originally published: Spring 1998: 60-65)

NOTES: 6-12 Indicates the novel would be appropriate for students in sixth through twelfth grades; w = would work well as a whole class novel, s/i = would work as a novel read by small groups or by individuals in the class.


A young boy washes up on the shore of Wales with no memory of his past. He saves a beautiful woman also washed ashore from the savage tusks of a boar. Later she claims to be his mother. When he turns 12 his powers start showing themselves and because he repented his misuse of these powers and hurled himself into a fire to try to save his victim, he was blinded. From his mother he learns to develop his “second sight,” and now he desperately wants to know his past and who his father is. Thus he embarks on a voyage to find the island kingdom his mother left. This fascinating story tells us of the forces that shaped the young Merlin and makes us want to know more, which is the way the author planned it since this is the first in a trilogy. 7-12 s/i


Barry is leaving his upper class grandparents in Ireland to join his equally prosperous parents in the United States. On his trip over on the Titanic he gets to know and care for Pegeen, the sister of the troublemakers from his village. We see life on the ship and how the first class passengers are treated differently than those in steerage. From his steward, Barry hears about the premonitions of disaster. When it strikes, he moves fast to find Pegeen who is locked behind a door in steerage manned by crew members to prevent these passengers from leaving. What becomes clear in this book is how inadequate the warning system was, how slow the crew’s reactions were, and why so many passengers in steerage died. Well done and engaging. 6-10 s/i


After running from Chicago in 1876 to save his life because he refused to throw a boxing match, Johnny ends up in St. Louis and is immediately recruited for the army despite his tender years. This story focuses on Johnny’s time in the army, his difficulties in accepting authority, and the practices of the veterans who see recruits as fair game. After almost no basic training, Johnny and his friend are sent into the Indian wars at Little Big Horn. 7-10 s/i


Tilden is entering the turbulent teen years when her mother brings a man into their lives. Soon she, her mom, and her sister are moving from the South to live in the cold North with Nick. Not only must Tilden get used to having a man in the house, she also has to get used to a new school and making new friends while dealing with her rebellious younger sister. Then her mom gets sick. Within a year it’s obvious that she’s not going to survive. But no one in the family knows how to talk about what’s happening. This beautifully written story exposes the raw feelings and the doubts and uncertainties that accompany watching a loved one die. This story left a lump in my throat. 7-12 s/i


Zinnia Thylor, one of six children, has a strong need to be herself and so when she uncovers a trail that seems to end in her backyard, she decides to uncover it. Through this work she not only uncovers family secrets, but she discovers lots about herself. 6-9 s/i

Lissa is seventeen and away at art school in Chicago when she gets the call from her mother. She is directed to come and get her eleven-year-old sister and care for her since her mother is on yet another drinking binge. Trying to be the parent to her younger sister and once again be responsible for the family is tough on Lissa. Her sister is unbelieving that her mother doesn’t want to take care of her, and she takes out her anger on Lissa. Eventually throughout the summer the girls are able to enrich each other’s lives but it still doesn’t diminish the hurt they constantly deal with. I thought this story rang true. The children of alcoholics are shown in realistic ways, not being able to trust what the mother promises but wanting to believe her desperately. Also, the roles the sisters take is consistent with what I know of alcoholic children. Lissa is the responsible one who ends up mothering her sister and her mother because she feels there is no one else to do it. 8-12 s/i


Walnut knows he’ll never be considered a man if he has to prove his manhood by shooting a target which he won’t be able to see because of his distorted eye sight. However, by using his other senses he shows he can see things others can’t see, Thus he is named Sees Behind Trees and goes on a journey with a village elder who hopes Sees Behind Trees will be able to “see” a place Grey Fire fell in love with and wants to find again. Through the journey this young man comes to understand what he can do by turning his handicap into an advantage. 5-9 s/i


Gerald by the age of three knew how to stay out of his drug-addicted mamma’s way when she has the white stuff. He knew his Aunt Queen loved him, and he loved being there while his mamma was in prison. But then one day she shows up with a new husband and his half-sister. After Aunt Queen’s death, Gerald must go to live with his family. He dearly loves his half-sister who always looks frightened, and when he figures out that his step-father is abusing her he decides he must stop him. A well-written story of abuse and poverty. 6-9 s/i


Sarah can’t understand why her mother uproots her and leaves her job just to move in with a man she has only known briefly. Then Sarah gets involved with the strangeness of the town and feels she’ll never fit in. She’s asked to play a fortune teller at a school carnival and is shocked to find out she can clearly see things when she looks into a crystal ball. What she tells people actually comes true so she’s branded as a witch by her school mates. Then the dreams start and Sarah is at the Salem Witch Trials. Could it really be true, as her only friend, Charlie, says, that the participants of the Salem Witch Trials have all returned to the same place to work out the struggles they experienced hundreds of years ago? Will Sarah survive? 8-12 s/i


Wow! This novel, based on historical fact, traces several years in the life of Solita, a 14-year-old Apache who, instead of finishing his warrior training, surrenders to the U.S. army along with the rest of Geronimo’s small band. The degrading railroad trip to Florida for resettlement is told in graphic detail. Then Solita is torn away from his people along with all the other children in his band and sent to an Indian school to learn to be “white.” Full of rage, Solita learns that to survive he must keep his Apache soul to himself. He is placed with a Quaker family in Pennsylvania for the summer and bonds with that family. When tragedy forces him to become a fugitive, he walks back home to Arizona. There he finds that he really has no home since he is now much more educated than the Apaches remaining on the reservation. This author shows her readers what it’s like when the majority culture tries to destroy and devalue another cultures. A moving, terrific book. 7-12 s/i

Thylor Ryan at 13 realizes he is responsible for the coma and possible death of an unpopular boy who wanted to be part of his gang. Thylor’s mother knows nothing of her son’s anguish but sends him to the mountains with relatives for the summer to get him away from his ne’er-do-well friends. Taylor’s sullenness gradually disappears when his great aunt and uncle put him to work and expect him to be a responsible part of the household. Meeting Jesse Sinkler, the illiterate son of a dirt poor pole cutter, gradually changes Thylor as he teaches Jesse to read in exchange for learning to shoot a rifle. Thylor rethinks his belief that friends are more important than family and begins to reorder his priorities. 7-12 s/i


When the old Navajo Harrison Chee’s hogan is set on fire, his grandson, Jesse, works to find out who or what is trying to harm his grandfather. During his investigation he becomes involved with Carolyn, the daughter of the owners of the trading post, and together they look for hints and information about the skinwalker who might be trying to harm Harrison. Through this compelling mystery we learn much about friendship and about Navajo culture and beliefs. Well-written and hard to put down. 8-12 s/i


Lane and her slightly crazy brother Charlie, live in the Panama Canal Zone with her mom and her dad who is in the military. When the story begins it seems that Lane and Charlie are dealing with the ordinary issues of growing up. Gradually, puzzling details appear such as pictures of the family with one person’s head cut out. While Lane is overcoming her fears and Charlie is spinning out of control, the family secret of their inability to deal with the death of the oldest child comes bubbling to the surface, 6-10 s/i

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Don’t You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. Simon & Schuster, 1996. 108 pages.

In her journal she writes for her English class, Sarah chronicles what is happening to her life since her abusive father returned home after a two-year absence. The responsible one, Sarah scrambles to provide for her younger brother when her mother leaves them alone and without money while she tries to find the husband who once again abandoned the family. Secretive and desperate, Sarah’s school work suffers as her life plummets downwards. By finally allowing the teacher to read the journal she is able to ask for help. 7-12 s/i


Jack accompanies his mother to see the dying grandfather he has never known, and on his deathbed his grandfather tries to strangle Jack. While at his grandfather’s house before the funeral, Jack dreams of a door to the past and begins to search for it in the house. Although he finds the door, he doesn’t decide to go back to the past until horrifying events in his life involving his alcoholic father propel him to the door so that he can determine his own future. Complex, compelling, I found it impossible to put down. Children of alcoholics, time travel, and glimpses of war activity in the Japanese theater during WW II are all part of this book. 6-12 s/i


This Newbery Winner sears images of the Dust Bowl into the reader’s mind as it tells the story of Billy Jo not only surviving daily living but also the death of her mother and infant brother. Written in free verse, this novel takes us into the mind and heart of Billy Jo as she struggles with her guilt over her mother’s death and her inability to communicate with her father. She must find a way to heal and she thinks she must leave to do so. An unforgettable story whose images slip into my head unbidden. 9-12 s/i
Gabe moves to the Northwest Territory to go to school so he can be close to his dad. One weekend he has the opportunity to fly over the area to take in its beauty, He’s surprised to see that the other two passengers are Raymond, his roommate from school, who has decided to give school up and return home and an old man from Raymond’s village. The pilot sets the plane down so they can have a closer look at the spectacular, thundering falls, and then the engine won’t start. The pilot is swept away down the river, and Raymond, Gabe and the old man begin their desperate struggle to survive the harsh Northwest winter. Action-packed, adventurous, and involving. 8-12 s/i

A strange girl who sits and stares at the beach, a teen lifeguard who can’t escape the rejection he feels from his father, and a twelve-year-old boy whose parents are struggling to hold their relationship together. All three meet in an unexpected way as two of them try to save the third from abuse or death at the hands of a parent. And in the saving, all find something important about themselves. Touching, poetic. 7-11 s/i

Mandy was blinded in the accident that killed her mother and must now get used to her new home with her great aunt and uncles. She’s given the room in the attic that was once her grandmother’s. When she leans out the window she often sees and hears scenes from the past, and it takes her awhile to figure out that she’s seeing back to the time of her grandmother. As she adapts to her surroundings and even makes a friend, she’s drawn into the family struggles of the past and comes to realize she can help in the healing that her grandmother’s abrupt leaving had on the family. 8-12 s/i

This first-person narrative of the tumultuous time of the Cultural Revolution in China details the life and difficulties of this 12-year-old. Always an outstanding student and from a family viewed as well off, she is shocked by the changes that label intellectuals and people with money as criminals who are hounded and often persecuted. Her family’s apartment is ransacked several times by the Red Guard and humiliated by them. Then her father is arrested and the Communists want her to testify against him. If she does so she will be guaranteed a place in the rising Communist Party; if she doesn’t, she will sacrifice her future in China. This engrossing story vividly shows what it was like to live through these times and how much people suffered. 7-12 s/i

Lang spends the summer with his mom on a glitzy estate where she works for a celebrity. He’s come out to his mom and is open about his relationship with his boyfriend so he believes he has everything worked out. Then the celebrity asks Lang to help entertain a teenager from France who will be visiting him. As Lang becomes good friends with the lovely Huguette and their relationship grows, he is thrown for a loop when he realizes he cares deeply about her. A fast-paced story with enough mystery in it makes it tough to put it down. MS. Kerr does it again— writes a compelling, thought-provoking story. 9-12 s/i

Anna comes up the driveway after school to discover that her mother’s car is gone and that her seven-month-old brother is screaming in his crib. When five-year-old Mandy comes home from school it becomes obvious that their mother will be gone for some time, perhaps on another drinking binge. Anna stays home from school to care for her brother and sister and one day while going to a rather remote park, she is sure she sees her mother’s car beneath the surface of the water. Desperate and frightened, Anna has to make a plan to survive since she fears what will happen to the three of them if it is discovered her mother is dead. This book shows the typical older child of an alcoholic parent who assumes responsibility for the family and has learned well that secrets must be kept. 7-12 s/i

When Pert Wilson’s daddy returns to Kinship after an absence of more than 14 years, she is sure her life will be perfect because she so desperately wants his acceptance. Throughout this story, narrated in alternate chapters by Pert and residents of her trailer park, we see her dad’s actions through many eyes. Pert doesn’t want to see what other’s see and won’t take a hard look at her daddy even when he stands her up for a father-daughter dance. All she knows is that her mother and brother get quieter and quieter the longer he is around. It takes her most of the summer to understand the difference between kin and family and to truly understand what home means. A satisfying sequel to Spite Fences. 8-12 s/i


In this fantasy-like tale, Ella only wants to be free of the “gift” that Lucinda has given her that makes her obey every order she is given. Because this feisty, appealing protagonist speaks her mind and can see things clearly, she is delightful. Although this is a retelling of the Cinderella story, the reader is treated to delicious twists and turns which create a new, exciting story. Very engaging! A Newbery Honor book. 6-9 s/i


Gordon Foley has a grandfather, the city’s ex-mayor, in jail for fraud who gives him the keys to his trademark ‘63 Studebaker. Gordie feels his senior year should be perfect since he has the car but then finds out that his grandfather wants Gordie to run for his old job. Caught up in the swirl of events surrounding his candidacy as well for his school candidacy for office, Gordie finds that having both a straight-talking, slightly outrageous girlfriend and a fantastic car are not enough to keep his senior year as carefree as he thought it would be. 10-12 s/i

Mazer, Norma Fox. *When She Was Good*. Scholastic, 1997. 234 pages

Em’s dad is an alcoholic, her mom can barely hold her life together, and her sister is mentally ill and violent. This very depressing book tells the story of Em’s life before and after her sister’s death as she tries to figure out how to nurture herself and support herself financially. After Em’s mom dies, life gets worse. Pamela, with no one to really care about her, gets verbally and physically violent. When the dad remarries, Pamela, now 18, drags Em away so they can live together on their own. But Pamela has no skills to allow her to hold down a job. Sinking even deeper into depression and/or fantasy, she constantly abuses her sister psychologically and physically. Em thinks she might be free when her sister dies suddenly, but she has to learn how to cope with the voice of her sister that she carries in her head. 9-12 s/i


When her mother leaves her father, 15-year-old Meguma is very upset, especially since she’s been left to live with her rarely-home father and her cranky grandmother. Meguma is not allowed to call or write her mother but does manage to write her anyway. Feeling very alone because her father spends most of his time at his mistress’s house and her grandmother only yells at her, Meguma is overjoyed when she begins to establish a relationship with a vivacious veterinarian whom she met when she took a wounded bird to her. This women eventually helps Meguma see her own positive attributes and see the possibilities of how she can resume a relationship with her mother. 8-12 s/i


After 12-year-old Sipho escapes the brutality of his stepfather by running away to Johannesburg, he finds life on the streets with other children is brutal too. Then he secures a job in a white man’s shop and although his physical needs are met, the emotional effects of the racism to which he is subject are also overwhelming. A very descriptive picture of the “new” South Africa. 7-12 s/i

A lovely young girl is raised on a remote mountainside by her mother who seems to be able to provide for all their physical needs. But a few days before the young girl’s thirteenth birthday when she and her mother take the long journey into town, the fabric of their lives changes. A young man is very taken with young Zel because of the confidence she shows in handling horses and also because she seems so direct and honest. When the mother finds out that her daughter liked this attention, she fears that her daughter might some day wish to leave her, and so to “protect” her from this fate, she imprisons her in a tower. This retelling of the Rapunzel story is so engrossing and so well done that the reader is caught in the web of its mystery and simply can’t put the book down. 7-12 s/i


In this city of the future, children are warehoused in dormitories until their brains are removed when they are fourteen and put in the bodies of creatures of the Overlords. But some children have escaped and work feverishly with the help of an adult, whose only embodiment is in a computer, to fight the powers of evil. An engrossing story that focuses on four children and what they are willing to do and give up to help free humanity. 8-12 s/i


Miracle McCloy, who lives with her eccentric grandmother and her distant father, knows she’s different. She’s been told stories of her mother’s tragic death and her miraculous birth, but now her father disappears and her grandmother announces he’s “melted.” Miracle longs for him and invents stories about what she could do to make him reappear. When she and her grandmother move in with her grandfather, he pays attention to Miracle and lets her take dance lessons while insisting she not tell her grandmother. Because mystery shrouds so much of her life, Miracle turns inward and hides her pain until it comes bursting through when she sets herself on fire. Then the secrets are told and she can begin to deal with the hard truth about her past. Touching and beautifully written. 7-11 s/i


Charity’s always been the preacher’s daughter but now into their small Southern community comes Adrienne, an eccentric artist who claims after a month long sensory deprivation experiment that she has seen Jesus sitting on a chair in her house. Charity is rather taken by Adrienne and her unorthodox ways, much to her father’s chagrin. Because this event has torn the town in two, Charity begins to question the rigid thinking of her father, and discord in their home surfaces. When her mother calls saying she won’t be back, her father withdraws into himself and becomes even more dogmatic about the religious controversy in town. It takes clear-thinking, caring Charity to help him deal with his own doubts. A moving, well-written book. 8-11 s/i


When 14-year-old Liyana Abboud’s family moves from St Louis to Jerusalem, the city where her father was born, her whole life is changed. She works to learn new languages, to understand tensions and the resulting discrimination between peoples, to fit into the sprawling family of her father, and to figure out how she, as an American Arab, can find a comfortable place for herself in this new world. Liyana is a charming, sometimes mischievous girl, who questions the ways of her father and his people by striking up a friendship with a delightful Jewish boy. I loved the spirit of the protagonist as I learned to negotiate the streets of Jerusalem with her and to unearth the values of a totally new culture. 7-12 s/i


Sarny, a young female slave, is being taught to read by Nightjohn, an escaped slave who returned to teach the others how to read. This story of dedication and determination against the cruelty of the slave owners brings home to us the power of being able to read. Some scenes of cruelty. 5-11 w

As the Civil War is ending, Sarny’s two children are ripped away from her, and this sequel to *Nightjohn* begins with Sarny’s search for her children. She journeys to New Orleans to find them and on her way meets an extraordinary women who befriends her. This story lingers on Sarny’s early life as she marries and begins schools to teach others to read and then quickly takes us to her 94th year. A very satisfying sequel. 5-11 s/i


Sunita, an 8th grader whose parents were born in India, finds her life turned upside down when her Indian grandparents come to visit for a year. Suddenly, her mother dresses in sarees and puts a red dot on her forehead and even takes a long leave of absence from her job at a community college. Suni is just getting to be friends with a boy she is interested in when her mother tells her she may no longer have boys come to see her. Instead of telling him the truth, Suni pretends disinterest in him so he won’t know how weird her family is. Through her trials with her family, her friend Liz is always there for her. Readers do learn about Indian culture as Suni finds she can talk to her grandfather and that telling the truth helps. 6-10 s/i


When the kidnapped Thankful Chelmsford’s daughter, Walking Breeze, is returned to the Chelmsford family in 1811, chaos erupts. She is a Shawnee and proud of it. She doesn’t understand why Ebie, her cousin, hates her, nor why Georgie, another half-blooded women, acts as she does. Through her presence the family deals with racist attitudes and deep emotions. Rinaldi, as always, draws us into the heart of her characters and her story as we learn even more about the history of the time. 7-12 s/i


As a child in 1798, Rebecca, a settler in Ohio, meets Tecumseh when he visits her family homestead built on the site his village used to occupy. Throughout the years Rebecca and her family become good friends with Tecumseh. She helps him with his English in the speeches he writes, and he teaches her about Indian life and beliefs. Their relationship gradually deepens into something much more than friendship, and both must make a decision about what to do. I loved all that I learned about Tecumseh and about the lives of settlers. 7-12 s/i


Lincoln Mendoza and his friend Tony, barrio brothers from San Francisco, spend a summer as exchange students in Japan. The sharing and learning about the culture of their host families is at times humorous, at times touching. Both boys see their own culture through new eyes as they learn more about themselves. 6-10 s/i


Lyca journeys to a new world and meets Will who considers himself a murderer because he acted to save his mother. His father had mysteriously disappeared years ago and Will wants to find him. The two team up and travel between Will’s world and a new, strange world where Will finds himself the keeper of the “subtle knife” which can easily give them access to other worlds. The adventure continues as the boundaries between the worlds thin and the danger of destruction at the hands of the specters continues. This one ends as a cliffhanger with some of our questions answered but many more raised. 8-12 s/i

Poor Palmer. He is a gentle soul who abhors violence towards animals, but lives in a town which thinks it is great sport each year to kill 5000 pigeons as its chief fund raiser. Most of the little boys relish the thought of turning ten and helping wring the necks of the pigeons who are not killed outright. Not Palmer, He dreads his tenth birthday and becomes increasingly unhappy with his decision to be part of a gang. After a pigeon pecks on his bedroom window and Palmer takes him into his life, everything changes. This is the story of Palmer’s journey towards acquiring the courage to be himself. A Newbery Honor book. 4-9 s/i


Buck Smith and Tunes Smith have been friends since birth. Tunes’ dad works for Buck’s family just like his ancestors did. Race has never been an issue for these two as they fish and boat together in the flats of the Chesapeake Bay area. Then a murder is committed, and because Tunes and Buck find the body, they are in danger of being accused of the crime. Will Buck speak up when Tunes is accused by the white man who tried to assault her? The crime tears open the community and brings out the latent racism and hypocrisy that have been part of our country’s history. A gripping story. 7-11 s/i


Pete, at 11, finds himself on an island with his alcoholic father who insists that he meet every ferry boat every day so he can be warned if a bad man comes. Pete has a very sketchy description to go by and no idea why he is looking for this man. In his travels around the Island between ferry dockings, he meets Rootie and finally finds a friend. When the man finally does come to the island it is clear he plans to kill Pete’s father. Pete Is shown as a child of an alcoholic who knows he can expect little from his father and so becomes very self-sufficient. 5-9 s/i


Paulie and what’s left of her family group lives near the beach in Haiti. They subsist on food from the sea and on what they can grow. Because of the political chaos In the country In 1993, there are no Jobs, and anyone supportive of Aristide, “the little priest,” is tortured or killed. The soldiers and thugs are in control and kill anyone who does not obey them without question, including a young man who is a close family friend. Paulie’s uncle is building a boat so some of them can leave and the story focuses on the time before they are forced to leave. This novel presents a strong picture of the horrors of living in Haiti under the military government. 6-10 s/i


It’s Slave Day at Robert E. Lee High School, a fundraiser in which students and a few willing teachers perform errands for the “masters” who bid on them in the school auction. One African-American student challenges the whole idea, and when he can’t seem to get any support for outlawing the day, he decides to “purchase” the Student Council president who is also African-American. Written from multiple perspectives in alternating chapters, this story shows how the day’s events cause many to rethink their approaches to their own lives. Involving and engrossing as these characters Jump off of the page into our own lives. 9-12 s/i


Moho Wat, a nine-year-old Shoshoni boy, proves himself after a mountain lion rips off his hand. First, he teaches himself to hunt with a bow and arrow again Then he pulls off a startling rescue of a girl of his tribe taken captive. Although the plot keeps us involved, the characters never seem developed enough. 5-8 s/i

This sequel to Walker of Time follows Tag, who was zapped back to ancient Hopi times, as he journeys forward to his own time in this century. He doesn’t get home all in one “walk” through time but stops in different historical periods in the Hopi canyon to help change attitudes and behavior in order to preserve the remnants of Hopi culture. This engrossing story is also a history of how native ruins were destroyed and how the conservation movement began. Original and engaging. A satisfying sequel. 7-11 s/i


This collection of the stories of Victor’s family is absolutely magical. He started out his journey towards story collecting by doubting the stupendous incidents his parents talked about until he went to Mexico to see for himself and learned that we are all walking stars if we would only recognize the special brilliance and power we have as human beings. Not only are these stories interesting and engaging, they validate the importance of stories from our own cultures. Funny, touching, imaginative. A great collection. 6-10 s/i


Aissa, a slave girl who never knew her parents, lives in a household with her older sister who seems better able than Aissa to outwardly accept that she is a slave. Set in the years just prior to the Revolutionary War, the reader sees the struggles of the slaves in the Ashley household to submit to their owner’s demands. Aissa and her sister, Bett, meet free blacks and because their owner is part of the group of white men of property writing the Massachusetts Constitution. They are privy to the political thought of the time. Eventually Bett can take no more of her mistress’s treatment, and she approaches lawyers she knows through her master to take her case and declare slavery illegal in Massachusetts. A fascinating novel that includes stories about Africa as well as strong portrayals of Africans who did not accept the way the masters defined them. 6-10 s/i


Woodrow comes down from the Appalachian hills to live with his grandparents after his mother disappears. Told from the point of view of his cousin, Gypsy, who lives right next door, this gentle, poignant tale takes us into the children’s deep inner places when sadness and loneliness stay. These cousins share their sixth grade year and gradually help each other deal with their losses. The characters and setting jump to life for the reader and we feel we are witnesses to the turmoil in this quiet Virginia town. I loved this book. 5-9 s/i


Melanin Sun and his hip mom have a good life together. Then she breaks it to him that she is in love with a white woman. His reaction to this news, which he feels shatters his world, is very realistic. He withdraws, won’t speak to her, and doesn’t know how to think about what is happening. He fears he will be labeled as gay, and his anger causes him to refuse to meet the woman so important to his mom. Terrifically done. 6-12 s/i
“Writing begins when teachers give their students silence and paper—then sit down to write themselves.”

—Donald Murray

Teachers have known for decades about the importance of writing with their students, but I had always been rather selective about the kind of composition I did in class. Personal journals were a favorite, but when it came to longer literary responses, short stories, or poems I tended to see my own paper load as too daunting. I simply didn’t have the time.

Then came the challenge, from the third row, the second seat. It was a rather timid request from Allison, asking me to join the class in the writing of spooky stories. At first it was done with a sheepish grin and a blush, but moments later her genuine interest in my response became more evident: “Why don’t you do one?” she asked. “We need an example and we want to see your work.”

Allison’s request was one of the best things to happen to me in my eleventh grade English class and has helped me to teach writing more sensitively and to appreciate better the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning. Since that watershed day, I have written regularly with my students and have often engaged in the same critiques, discussions, and revisions I asked them to do. As I reflect back upon the experience, I can suggest a variety of reasons why writing with students is so important. Not only does it make teachers more perceptive writers but also allows them to become part of their students’ learning community, to be a participant rather than the arbiter on the other side of the desk. Most importantly, it interweaves teaching and learning in an interactive, democratic context that makes teachers and students partners in a real-life literacy endeavor.

Participation Breeds Democracy

To write with one’s students is to learn very quickly about the special relationship that can be forged through collaborative work—the shaping and reshaping of essays, the experience of working through drafts of ideas, the individual investment of a writer’s essence as he or she transforms personal feelings into sentences and paragraphs. Only days after I declared my intentions to participate in the spooky story assignment, I began to see the significance of my role as fellow writer. It began when three of my students visited me after school to read my rough draft and get feedback on their work. For many, this encounter may seem trivial, but for me it was a compelling example of how my role in the classroom had changed and expanded. Rather than being approached as the omniscient judge of successful literature, I was seen as a fellow writer who was struggling to refine my ideas and enhance my prose. Within fifteen minutes, we had formed a circle and were quietly engrossed in the reading of our drafts.

Anne, one of three students, was honest and thoughtful when she posed questions about certain paragraphs I had written. Why was I writing in the first person when I so often suggested third person omniscient? Did I feel that my protagonist was well enough developed, considering the goals of the assignment and the required length?

Moments passed quickly, the papers changed hands a second time, and the reading and discussion continued. This time I had Dart’s paper and Kenneisha had mine. Again the feedback and discussion was a vigorous example of the surprising parity that seemed to exist among the four of us as we shared ideas. Kenneisha found what she felt were trite expressions and was quick to identify them with a wry smile. Because I had spent much of the first weeks of class discussing clichés and platitudes, she was more than eager to find some weaknesses in my own writing.

As I read over Bart’s story, it was easy to appreciate the fluid, effortless rhythm of his writing, the transitions from scene to scene—the smooth and rich development of character. Perhaps I had noticed all of it before, but I had a sense that as a fellow writer I was better able to applaud his effort. It was truly unique.

That first session lasted an hour and established relationships that did not exist when I was not an actively engaged member of the composing being done, In some ways...
I felt like an accepted member of a club, an initiate who had passed his initiation. Because I was confronting the same problems and seeking the same critical response, the process had been transformed. In his book Empowering Education, Ira Shor discusses the democratic class as being a sharing of power, an open forum for discussion, criticism, and change.

“The democratic teacher,” writes Shor, “gives up the right to dominate the discourse, to go on speaking if few are listening and many are bored” (167). Later, in a democratic context, he adds, “both teacher and students research the learning process under way, to discover how teaching and learning are progressing” (169). The dynamics of writing with students rather than being despotic overseer, of exposing a part of yourself on paper, is a powerful step toward sharing power and opening the class to other voices. For me, the chemistry of the class, the atmosphere, seemed to change rather dramatically.

**Participation Breeds Sensitivity**

Two days later our complete rough drafts were due, and already my involvement in writing had changed my approach to the assignment. Where earlier I had mandated that the best stories from each group be read, I now asked that each group select an interested and willing reader—the name being unnecessary. In fact, part of my concern as to how the papers should be read came from my own trepidation as the due date began to close in on me. It is, I believe, quite natural to feel empathy for other writers but nothing breeds true compassion like a walk in that writer’s shoes. As I reworked and revised my story, I became more aware of what the upcoming critique session could mean. It was a time to shine a light on certain papers, a time to check progress, and measure writing skill. As I considered my own feelings and the intimidation that some might feel, I quickly adjusted the activities so that no one would leave feeling alienated or embarrassed.

Writing with the class also opened my eyes to the possibility for competition—an aspect of education that has been promoted by conservative politicians who aspire to make our system more like the “real world.” In his book No Contest, Alfie Kohn chronicles the regressive characteristics of competition, the deleterious effects of pitting student against student in a scenario that guarantees losers. Again, I cannot emphasize enough the unique sense of understanding that occurs when teachers are themselves writers. It was clear that I didn’t want to be compared to others but that I did want cooperative sharing. Teaching without actual involvement can make us desensitized to such divisive aspects of competition.

**The Importance of Sharing Power**

With students in groups of three, we began the critique process. As with previous sessions, students were asked to exchange papers and complete an informal response which focused on the ways the stories could be improved. In this context, as in the one previous, my own engagement in writing tended to alter and enhance the atmosphere for meaningful learning. For instance, it was clear from the start that my role as writer and fellow participant had made the classroom a much more empowering setting for a truly open discussion. With their teacher at a desk, sitting with other writers • many students felt more liberated to engage actively and forcefully in the oral discussion that followed the student critiques. As students volunteered to step to the front to read their drafts and reflect upon the responses of their peers, my authority gradually dissipated and I became another participant in the class.

Later, when I shared my piece of prose, the students again took the initiative in addressing valid concerns about my paper. As a writer who had enjoyed years of being the official authority of quality writing, I was edifying and even uncomfortable to be relegated to the place of fellow writer. It had been five years since I had been in a situation where my writing was openly criticized, where my judgments were questioned, and where people felt no reservations about recrafting my self-proclaimed masterpiece. It was, to put it simply, an extremely revealing experience. If I felt nettled by obvious lack of appreciation these students seemed to have for my paper—and I did—how, then, did they feel after months of my directives and commands and monolithic prescriptions for revision? Did I take the time to consider their goals and personal aspirations when they presented a composition to me? To become a writer in one’s writing class is to delve into such questions of personal expression and to understand the need for humanism.

Like artillery fire, the comments came at me from virtually every part of the room. Katie wondered why I had ended the story so abruptly and contended that my main character still seemed vague. From the middle of the room came Andrew’s request that I add more detail to the final scene. He too believed the ending was rushed, as David reiterated the class’s confusion about the narrator’s transformation from storyteller to villain and suggested I work more into her development. I began to feel both frustrated and enlightened. I also, as a practitioner, began to feel like I had
rediscovered something valuable about the teaching of writing and my place as a professional whose job is to nurture a love of the written word. How much criticism—even positive, constructive criticism—was too much? Were my suggestions for revision truly a catalyst for growth, or was I depositing information into beaten receptacles as Paulo Freire discusses?

That first critique session, and my volatile feelings toward it, made me realize how much personal investment is involved in writing and how sensitive we must be in becoming a part of that literacy event. Clearly, it was not a lesson I would have considered as a non-writer. It came from standing in front of the class and exposing my craft to the students as they did theirs. It came from a democratic context that made me vulnerable. It highlighted the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning.

**Empowering Through Full Participation**

As a writing teacher, the experience also allowed me to turn a corner, one that I knew I had to pursue. I knew that beyond the class critique stood a glaring truth about student autonomy and reflective thought. As teachers,” writes Robert Probst, “we should strive not to keep our students out, but to help them get in, and we do that by participating with them in the transactional process of making meaning linguistically” (77). I knew that the experience had changed my policy toward process. No longer would my suggestions be elevated over other students. No longer would the writing process be a linear set of easy, cook-book-like steps that were based only on my suggestions. Now I would write my comments with other students.

The experience also generated a new approach to how I evaluated my students’ papers. Rather than collecting final drafts and writing my responses, I devised a portfolio system which demanded the cooperative effort of the students. All papers could be revised within two weeks of the end of any marking period. No papers would be graded and every piece of writing would be kept in a manila folder for a semester-ending conference. Instead of writing comments separate from other students, I would add my reactions to theirs and then release writers..., to choose their own direction. In the end, the final grade would be a collaborative negotiation between the writer and me after a discussion about progress, change, and the evolution of their work.

In addition, I would also require students to include a final reflection of their collective work, the revisions done, and the overall progress made. What is important in the teaching of writing,” contends Robert Probst, “Is to transfer power to the student. The power for making judgments about the quality of their work must become the student’s” (76). Probst’s words seemed especially accurate in light of my own experience with the spooky story and the feedback I had garnered from students.

**Conferencing and Self Reflection**

Thus, the conferences I had with students who came to see me about their semester grades were both amiable and productive. Instead of being a debate over marks and comments, much of the talk centered on the decisions made by the students and their self-reflection. What was their response to revisions done, to the evaluation of certain work, and the suggestions made by certain students?

Sara, one of many students who joined me for a portfolio conference, was quick to delve into the complexities of her work, pointing to her tendency to write about depression and use flowery metaphors. With such insight, it was easy to suggest strategies for further growth. Also significant was our ability to transcend teacher-driven prescriptions and explore Sara’s personal aspirations as an artist who took her craft seriously.

For others, the discussions needed more input from me to nurture confidence and introspection. For Jenny, I needed to raise several open-ended questions concerning patterns in her writing. Overtime, however, she became less reticent about her portfolio and her vision for her own writing. Is the conference to portfolios? I agree with Robert Tierney in his suggestion that:

> Conferences may be among the most vital means of supporting self-assessment. Conferences offer a unique means of supporting self-assessment. Unlike more formal self-evaluation procedures, conferences can follow the lead of the student and offer support or feed back necessary to prompt as well as guide reflections. (119)

For my new direction, the conferences were a priceless way to engender confidence and sincerity. In many ways, they seemed a natural part of the democratic class. It has been five months since I first picked up a pen, accepted the invitation of an intrepid young lady, and joined my class
in composing and revision. Since that time, I have learned a great deal about my writing and a great deal more about the teaching of composition. Language is, in the end, a very social and personal act. As Sharon Crowley argues, it cannot be “isolated from its contexts which are myriad” (38). In writing with my students, I altered that context and enhanced the way writing was perceived. It is a contextual and philosophical change that all English teachers should explore as they make their classrooms more student-centered and celebrate the natural confluence of teaching and learning.

Works Cited


As the newest member of our guest editing team to join MCTE, the task of selecting three articles from 1999-2004 was particularly enjoyable. It provided me—during my first year of teaching in Michigan—with the opportunity to take time and look through past issues of *LAJM*. Not being familiar with Michigan or its schools, *LAJM* has given me a window into education in Michigan. From university classrooms, to policy, to high school and middle school teachers and classrooms, *LAJM* has been an invaluable resource for me in thinking about how my own experiences compare with the educators in Michigan.

Brian White’s “A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching” (18.1[S 02]: 25-33) speaks to me as a teacher educator questioning how to talk about language with my own students. Jennifer Conrad’s “Making Research Real: The Multi-Genre Research Project” (19.1 [S 03]: 13-16) takes me back to my own years teaching high school English and trying to drum up my own enthusiasm for the annual research paper. Finally, Mary Jo Finney’s “If I Didn’t Let it Go it Would Just Stick On My Chest’: From Language to Silence” (18.2[F 02]: 11-14) addresses the very nature of teaching through a tragedy.

**A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching**

*Brian White*

It was April of this year, I was teaching the Secondary Literature Methods course for English majors and minors, and the topic for the day was oral language in the classroom. We talked about standard English and what that means to them. We talked about codeswitching, how this works, and if they think it is fair to ask all students to speak the same. We talked about a lot of things in relation to language in the classroom. This topic seemed to raise a lot of debate (some of it instigated by me of course), and the students in my all white methods course have some difficulties in understanding the problem.

*LAJM* has given me a window into education in Michigan. From university classrooms, to policy, to high school and middle school teachers and classrooms, *LAJM* has been an invaluable resource for me in thinking about how my own experiences compare with the educators in Michigan.

It was after this difficult class that I was in my office looking through the back issues of *LAJM* that I had been assigned for this issue when I found Brian White’s article “A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching.”

Not being that fully familiar with *LAJM* or with MCTE, I was ecstatic to see the inclusion of this article showing the importance of pushing our mostly white future teachers to question what it is like to not be the “normal, the “standard”, or the “dominant” in classroom situations. It is too easy to say that codeswitching is beneficial and needed in English classrooms. We need to have our teachers question what their students are experiencing in their classrooms.

Although this article deals with teacher education in a university setting, I would like to think that it still pertains to and reaches teacher in a public school setting. So often when we are teaching, whether in a university or a high school, we become entrenched in our own lives and teaching ideas that we forget the importance of every student sitting in front of us on a daily or weekly basis. Reading articles in *LAJM* helps me to remember what it is that is important when I step into my classroom: the students sitting in front of me, every student that is sitting in front of me. I need to remember who they are and what their lives are like. In remembering this, I am more likely to think about what they are going through, not only sitting in my class, but outside of my class as well with their family, their friends, and their relationships.

Brian White’s activity asks students to put themselves into the shoes of “the other.” These are the students that we “teach” to succeed in our classrooms by speaking standard English, but we don’t question what we are asking them to give up. I am proud to be associated with a journal that recognizes the importance of questioning what exactly it is that we ask students to give up to succeed in our classrooms.

**Making Research Real: The Multi-Genre Research Project**

*Jennifer Conrad*

One purpose for *LAJM* has always been to give a place for teachers’ voices. It is a place where teachers of all levels can speak and listen to other teachers from across the state. *LAJM* has become a community of educators,
where ideas can be exchanged and conversations can begin and continue to influence educators of all ages and years of experience. It’s a place where we can all gather to gain the strength needed to continue our important work, to continue to influence and educate future generations.

When I read Jennifer Conrad’s “Making Research Read: The Multi-Genre Research Project,” I commiserated on two different levels. I, of course, remember reading hundreds of research papers, dry voiceless research papers. But I also remember these papers on another level. I remember writing these papers – one a year from eighth to eleventh grade. Luckily, my senior English teacher felt we were beyond the typical research paper.

I think every teacher reading Conrad’s piece knows what she is talking about and has felt the same way every year when assigning and grading these dreaded papers. But what to do? How do we change the tradition of what we do in English classes? Often, this type of fun, innovative project is given to honors students, students who need very little motivation and are typically the better writers to begin with. What impressed me about this project and with Conrad’s classes is that students who do not like to write enjoyed this project. We have all had the students whose papers we read hoping they fulfilled the requirements, hoping that we can at least give them that low D to get them through the class. But the student who did his project on Edgar Allan Poe not only exceeded the expectation of “fulfilling the requirements,” he found a connection. He found an interest in an English project, which is every English teacher’s wildest fantasy come true: a student who had fun and still fulfilled the learning objectives. If only this were possible everywhere. Well wait… maybe it is!!

If I Didn’t Let it Go It Would Just Stick On My Chest: From Language to Silence

Mary Jo Finney

I think all of us remember where we were when we heard, or saw, the tragic events of 9/11. I had returned from a trip late the night before and was awakened by a phone call from my mother screaming, “Are you watching this?!” Stunned, I was glued to the T.V. for hours unable to think, to move, to articulate anything. All I could do was cry. I could not choose articles from LAJM without looking at the entire issue dedicated to 9/11, “Using Words of Healing in the Fall” of 2002.

The story that Mary Jo Finney tells of her college students writing with elementary students is amazing. It is exactly this kind of work that allows college students going into the teaching profession a chance to work with school age students and to gain experience, hands-on experience. The story of Patti and Theo is about perspective, possibly maturity, but it is definitely about language and the need for some to use language to express while for others, that expression is just too much. For Theo, it seemed that watching a television show on 9/11 reawakened or reinforced his fears and he wanted to write. In his words, “If I didn’t let it go it would just stick on my chest” (13). Patti, on the other hand, didn’t want to dwell on the negative but wanted to move Theo past the screaming and fires to more positive images of the tragedy. “Patti, admitting she wanted to avoid focusing on the detail of the vent, understands that writing and reading about something can be almost as real as living through it” (13).

As teachers, we need to remember that not everyone we encounter works through things in the same way. The choice to not talk about something is just as much of a choice as choosing the words to represent our feelings. Sometimes we, as English teachers, get so caught up with language that we believe that students must give voice to everything. For some students, though, silence is as necessary in healing as voice.
In eleven years of working with future English teachers at a mid-sized, Midwestern university, I have had only a handful of students who were not White. This academic year, I have taught the equivalent of six courses for future teachers and have had three students of color (two in one course), more than in any previous year. Although our university and the public schools in our region are increasingly diverse, our teacher education program, like most programs across the country, remains largely homogenous (Sleeter; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts). As McFalls & Cobb-Roberts note,

Understanding diversity issues has become a fundamental component of teacher education programs in colleges and universities across the United States. By the year 2025, it is predicted that the proportion of students of color will increase to approximately 50% of the student population, and the majority of teachers will continue to be White, middle-class women (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Singh, 1996). To ensure academic success for all students, teachers need to understand, appreciate, and respect the differences their students bring to the classroom. (164)

Of course, language differences are among those most worthy of understanding, appreciation, and respect. Most of my students come to the university from nearly all-White high schools; many have had very little contact with people of color. They know that many of their future students will be speakers of “non-standard dialects,” and they often express concern about their own ability to respond appropriately and helpfully. They wonder if they will be able to understand their students, if they will know how to respond to dialect-laden speech and writing, and if their students will be willing to change, to write and speak more “mainstream” English.

Surely this is a sign that our efforts to promote and enhance diversity are succeeding. When students who arrived at the university relatively unaware and perhaps even somewhat afraid of linguistic diversity graduate with richer understanding of and greater openness to dialectal and cultural differences, we might assume that we are achieving some of our most important goals as educators. But greater awareness and openness are not enough. For example, one result of these attitudinal changes is that many of our students conclude, at least tentatively, that when they become teachers they will encourage their linguistically diverse students to continue to value and to use their non-standard dialects outside of the classroom (unless they are applying for a job), while requiring everyone to learn and to use Standard English inside of the classroom (at least most of the time).

Honoring the use of both home codes and power codes (Delpit, Fecho) in various situations seems to solve an important problem: How can we show students that we respect the beauty and power of their native dialects and at the same time teach them to use Standard English as the language of education and commerce? As Fecho and others (e.g., Pan; Fox) have demonstrated, however, codeswitching is no easy answer to that thorny problem. For example, Fecho describes culturally and linguistically diverse high school
students who found themselves “caught in a linguistic catch-22: They could opt for the home codes and appear natural (a sought-after attribute in this community of speakers) or they could opt for standard codes and be considered proper (a necessity for negotiating the main-stream culture)” (381). Fecho argues that these students didn’t have much chance of being perceived as both natural and proper simultaneously and that codeswitching endangered their relationships and their status in their home communities. One of Fecho’s students “spoke to the manner in which imposed codeswitching causes discomfort at the least and alienation in the extreme” (381). Similarly, Pan discomfort and alienation she experienced as a non-standard dialect speaker in the academy, of the assault she felt upon her White, Italian-American, working class culture and language, and of her growing determination to resist the imposition of required codeswitching by a dominant culture.

So, although many of our mainstream-English-speaking future teachers seem to believe that imposed codeswitching is the way to help students be comfortable and successful in every situation, Fecho and Pan help us to see some of the reasons why many students resist and resent imposed codeswitching, even when they are told that codeswitching ability will help them to “get ahead.” The future teachers in my classes, the vast majority of whom have never been asked (let alone required) to switch codes, often emphasize what their future students are likely to gain by becoming fluent in both the home codes and the power codes; but Fecho and Pan illustrate the deeply penetrating losses experienced by some students who are required to switch codes in order to meet what often appears to them to be an arbitrary standard.

My guess is that my students’ faith in codeswitching stems in part from their exposure to cultural myths. For example, they seem to believe that the ability to codeswitch will automatically open the doors of commerce and the academy to people of color. By contrast, one of Fecho’s (2000) African-American students plainly declares that, even if a non-mainstream speaker were to acquire the standard dialect, “there’s no way he’d fit in” in the dominant culture (381). But my students’ opinions might also simply arise from lack of experience: they’ve never had to codeswitch to try get along or to try to get ahead. They’ve never FELT what it’s like to be forced to codeswitch. Their language has always been standard and acceptable. For them, the home codes are the power codes.

What’s a Teacher Educator to Do?

Recently, while teaching a required course in critical theory for senior English majors, the vast majority of whom are future teachers, I found myself wondering how I could help my students experience at least some of the alienation that speakers of non-standard dialects might feel when they attempt to integrate into the academy, when they are told rather forcefully that their home codes are insufficient and incorrect. My purpose was not to teach them that codeswitching was “wrong” or necessarily harmful, but I wanted them to understand that teaching and enforcing codeswitching can be difficult and risky, that it can be a too-facile answer to the question, “So, how are you going to respond to nonstandard dialects in your classroom?” In order to give my students some first-hand experience at the problem-of codeswitching, I devised the following instructional sequence.

First Impressions: Responding to an Opinionnaire

As a way of beginning our conversation about linguistic diversity and teachers’ responses to non-standard dialects, I gave my students the following opinionnaire (see Sniagorinsky, McCann, and Kern or White and Johnson for an explanation of opinionnaire exercises). I asked my students to respond individually to each item on the opinionnaire (see Figure 1) by circling either “strongly agree,” “agree-,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.” Then I put the students in groups to share and discuss their answers. Their job in the groups was to identify the items about which their group most disagreed and to try to achieve consensus on those items.

After the small-group discussions, we had a brief large-group report and discussion of the most contentious items. Of course, some of the items were not contentious. For example, most of the students agreed that their native dialect is the standard (item #1), and nearly all agreed that speakers of non-standard dialects must be taught the standard (item #5). The groups tended to disagree about items like #8: although they generally agreed that everyone must learn the standard, some felt that an imposed standard was essentially and inescapably racist, while others argued that an imposed standard could be a powerful anti-racist tool.

For homework I asked the students to identify the opinionnaire item they felt most strongly about and to write their responses to that item in their journals. Many of the students chose to write about the importance of codeswitching
and the absolute necessity of teaching the standard dialect. The following responses are representative:

1. People have a right to speak their own language or dialect because it is part of who they are. Language is an important part of a group’s culture. However, I do think that in order for there to be good communication among all Americans, there needs to be a common language that all citizens are at least comfortable using. In business and politics, for example, people need to be able to understand each other. That does not mean that their language or dialect should be banned. They should certainly have the opportunity to use it in addition to the standard English.

   -Diane

2. I think that everyone in the U.S. should learn to speak and write Standard English. They will be at a much better advantage if they do. However, I do believe children should keep their native languages as well. This may be a very prejudiced remark but I believe if you come to the U.S. to live you should learn our language.

   -Peg

3. Language is a form of identity and forcing a person to learn and use a non-native language may confuse their cultural identity or place their native culture secondary to that which speaks Standard English. Then we come to the question of necessity. I struggle with this because I tend to believe that the only way to communicate on a national level, in commerce and education, is with one universal language; but I know that this isn’t politically correct. I do also value the various cultures that make up America and would never wish for them to be suppressed.

   -Eric

4. I strongly disagree with the belief that forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English is a form of racism. How is this racism? Is it racism when you go to China and everything is in Chinese and you are expected to know Chinese in order to live there? Of course not! No one even thinks of the concept of racism when this occurs in China, France, Japan or Germany—why would they when it occurs in the U.S.? Every country needs a common language to unite its people, in business, in education, in religion, and in family.

   -Barb

5. By forcing non-native English speakers to learn English, educators are giving them the best possible chance to succeed. It would not do any good to allow other languages or variances to grow.

   —Jeff

6. I have been around BEV and to me it is like a second language. I think it would make things much easier. To all have one Standard dialect of English in common. Don’t lose your existing dialect, but as a nation, let’s have one standard dialect of English in common for all purpose use.

   -Jana

As you can see, some of the students’ essays betrayed some misunderstanding of the terms dialect and language still, a high percentage argued, often rather passionately, that a teacher’s goal should be to teach all students to speak and write Standard English in the classroom while at the same time honoring and valuing the students’ home dialects in appropriate (usually nonacademic) settings. In order to facilitate further discussion of these issues, I asked students to trade journal entries with a classmate and to respond in writing. In the large-group, we then discussed ideas which we found particularly important, compelling, or disagreeable.

Following our discussion, I asked the students to reflect in writing on the opinionnaire exercise, to evaluate the experience, and to explain what they felt they might have learned so far. The students reported that the opinionnaire activity (including the writing and the discussion) was very helpful to them in clarifying their ideas and in broadening their views. For example, one student wrote that “the opinionnaire was particularly challenging because it forces you to get right at the heart of the Standard English controversy”; another wrote that “some of the questions on the opinionnaire were difficult to answer because there were a lot of ‘what ifs.’ There were many questions that we disagreed on, but when we listened to each other, other people’s views made a lot of sense. After talking to my group members, I ended up changing a lot of my answers because they made me
see it an entirely different way”; finally, another student wrote that “it became very clear to me, through the questionnaire exercise, that language carries power. I hadn’t seen it as having economic power before. The power to communicate—in the world of commerce, yes, but not the brute strength of excluding people some may call ‘inferior.’”

After completing our discussion of the opinionnaire and our responses, we read Bob Fecho’s article “Critical Inquiries into Language in an Urban Classroom.” We responded to the article in small- and large-group discussions, sometimes using individual writing to record our perspectives and our developing understandings. Fecho’s urban, African- and Caribbean-American students taught us about some of the potential perils of codeswitching; his article also emphasized the importance of getting to know our students, their cultures, and their dialects, and it encouraged us to invite high school students to inquire systematically into their own languages and dialects.

After we had discussed the opinionnaire and the article, I sensed that my students were more open to thinking about the risks of imposing a standard—but the issue still seemed entirely too theoretical, too distant. I wanted them to read about Pari’s experiences, but I was afraid that they would not feel the power of her story. After all, Pad is White and, for the most part, her story is written in Standard English. In addition, Pan writes about her experiences as a working class New Yorker in the doctoral program at the CUNY graduate school: in many ways, her experience was as distant from my students’ lives as were the experiences of Fecho’s African- and Caribbean-American high school students. I thought that, in response to Pad, thy students might fall back to their rather comfortable position: “Pan’s story proves that, although it’s hard, you need to preserve the home codes for home and learn the power codes for education. After all, Pan has made it. She’s writing in Standard English but she’s still proud of her heritage.” In short, I was afraid that they would not understand Pan’s story but that they would not feel anything of what she (or Fecho’s students) felt. Often, students who are required to codeswitch feel that hidden and arbitrary rules are being forced upon them without explanation or apology. Like Fecho’s students, they feel that their natural speech, ways of communicating which have been both successful and unconscious, are no longer acceptable. That’s what I wanted my students to feel.

Ways Without Words: The No “E” Exercise
Fall/Winter 2006

Delpit helps her students to feel some of the discomfort involved in learning and speaking a new dialect feature by requiring them to insert the sound /iz/ after each initial consonant. She reports that the exercise is effective but that even the students who struggle with sneaking the /iz/ dialect have no problem writing it. I think that’s because the exercise calls for the addition of a feature instead of the subtraction of a feature. Perhaps the exercise would be more difficult and more realistic if it were to prohibit the use of a habitually retied upon feature. This is what I do, I began our next class session by deciding saying:

We’ve been doing a lot of reading and talking about differences between home culture and school culture, home codes and power codes. We’ve completed an opinionnaire and we’ve read and discussed Fecho. So far, though, we’ve really been talking about other people’s experiences. I’d like to try to bring this a little closer to home. Let’s begin class today by doing some freewriting about our memories of our first day in school or our first day at the university. What do you remember about the transition? How did you feel about being in school? Did you have any cultural barriers to overcome?

Before they began to write, I said, “You know that I usually write with you. This time, I prepared my freewrite before class because I’d like you to follow my example. Use my writing as a model if you can.” I put my essay on an overhead and projected it onto the wall. Here’s my essay in its entirety:

On my first day in school, I was sort of in trauma. I didn’t want to go away from my mom or my room or my dad. I was not in a good mood during our short walk from my front door to a big round room I’d soon know as my school room. Mrs. B was tall and imposing; I was short and found this situation awfully scary. I did want to go back with my Mom. I couldn’t stand staying. Boys and girls walking about, boys and girls I didn’t know. For many ticks of a clock I was afraid that I was not in my right room. Scary. So scary. At last, my day wasn’t too bad. In fact, as I ran back to Mom, I was thinking, “School’s not so awful.”

My students read my essay and looked at me quizzically. They knew that the essay seemed kind of stilted, but they
didn’t ask why I had written it that way. The truth was that I had written the essay without using any words containing the letter “e”—but I didn’t tell them that. I simply asked if they had any questions about what they were supposed to do, reminded them that they’d be sharing their essays with each other, and asked them to begin. After about eight minutes, I asked the students to stop writing and to trade papers. Their job was to take their classmate’s paper, to read it carefully looking for words that contain the letter “e,” to cross those words out (marking them incorrect), and to record the number “wrong” at the top of the page. “You’ll notice,” I went on, “that my model paragraph contained no e’s. I hope you followed my model. Please correct your classmate’s paper now.” The students diligently complied, some with puzzled glances, some with knowing looks and smiles communicating to me that they understood my game. After the students finished crossing out and counting, I announced that any paper with more than seven wrong should receive a failing grade. (Nobody had fewer than 25 “wrong”; some had as many as 65).

The students returned the papers to their owners. I then explained phase two of the assignment. “Now, I’d like you to fix your essay. Please rewrite it, but remember, no C’s.” Now there was some nervous laughter in the room, followed by some expressions of exasperation. Bros were furrowed; I could feel the anxiety level rising. Students were writing and crossing out, sometimes erasing forcefully. After about 5 minutes, I interrupted them and asked them how they were doing. Our initial discussion was animated:

“This is way too hard?”
“I never knew how often I used the letter e.”
“Is this how it feels to be told that you can’t write the way you’ve always written?”

For homework, I asked them to reflect on the “no e” exercise and to write down their responses. Because I wanted them to evaluate the exercise itself as well as their responses to it, I asked them to keep their responses anonymous. I wanted them to be able to criticize my use of the exercise without worrying about offending me and without the concerns to “political correctness” some of them mentioned when responding to the opinionnaire. Here are some representative reflections on the “no e exercise”:

1. The exercise with the no letter e paragraph was a terrific means of making the issue real. Some people may have had flat doing it but the frustration level sky-rocketed and that’s not something I could tolerate on a daily basis for real grades. Of course, it’s not exactly like what non-Standard English speakers and writers experience, but it was close enough for us to understand it at a more personal level.

2. I think it was very effective in communicating how frustratingly difficult it can be to be a non-English speaking or ESL student in an American classroom. I also think that it demonstrated a certain amount of ambiguity that exists in grading work of ESL or learning disabled students. A number of students stated that it made them feel “stupid,” despite the fact that they are clearly intelligent students in their last year at the university.

3. We were placed in a situation where we had no choice but to write in away that was unfamiliar and almost foreign to us. It made me take a step back and really think about and recognize that writing in Standard English, even though it is considered “standard” is definitely not standard for everyone.

4. When I filled out the opinionnaire, I thought that I knew exactly how I felt. Basically, I had sympathy for ESL students and African Americans who were uncomfortable with Standard English, but essentially it was something they would have to deal with. This is the way our world is, and it’s not going to change. And while I still believe that these students need to learn Standard English to be successful, I now believe educators need to be more sensitive to their needs. It was very frustrating and impossible to write well and naturally under YOUR rules.

5. I always assumed that speakers of AAVE [African-American Vernacular English] and other dialects had no problems with Standard English. This exercise made me realize how difficult it must be.

6. The no e exercise was a real eye opener for me. I got the feeling that was how people felt when they were trying to change their dialect into proper English. Restricting how and what we could write helped us to see what people who are not used to or comfortable with Standard English must feel.
7. It was nearly impossible for me to write a coherent thought the second time when we couldn’t use words with the letter “e” in them. I was so fixated on not using the letter that I couldn’t think clearly, let alone write creatively. How hard it must be for students who are asked to write under those kinds of conditions. The exercise helped me to feel their frustration. The restrictions of Standard English must seem just as ridiculous to them as the restriction of not using the letter E was to us.

8. It is easy for me to say that we should have a standard and that everyone should follow it because my language is the standard. The “e” exercise helped me to understand that a standard is easy only to those who already know it—while to those that don’t it is a very powerful tool of alienation.

I was hoping that the exercise would help my students to sense at least some of the discomfort and alienation that imposed codeswitching can engender, so I was pleased with my students’ reflections. But of course, not all students responded so positively to the exercise. Two of the 23 students in the class felt that the exercise was too drastic. For example, one student said,

"I thought it effectively demonstrated the point of not being able to say what you want to say in the way you want to say it, but my personal opinion of it is that the exercise was far more extreme than the issue of standardized English and dialects. Having to adjust the way you speak or write to a norm/standard is not the same as being unable to use one of the most used and most essential letters of one’s alphabet."

Another student commented that the exercise was “fun and interesting,” but that it “was too removed from what non-standard English speakers/writers feel. I had no idea where you were going with it.” I think I understand what these students are trying to say, and they do have a point. My imposed standard removed a high number of words from their available lexicon, forcing them to alter their utterances rather drastically. These students are arguing that when we require speakers of non-standard dialects to use Standard English, we do not remove from them so many words that are so essential to their communication. This is true. Still, the exercise had to be very intense in order to help the students feel some of the negative emotion involved with codeswitching. Furthermore, the letter “e” does not appear more frequently in Standard English than do, say, final consonant clusters in African American Vernacular English. When we add other “non-standard” features of AAVE (the use of proximity to show possession, the acceptability of multiple negation, and so on), we could argue that native speakers of certain nonstandard dialects deal with many more rule changes than my students had to deal with for the “no e exercise.” In addition, I did not ask my students to speak without “e’s.” If I had, they might have found, as Delpit’s students do, that speaking the new dialect is even more difficult than writing it.

I am aware that the exercise is artificial. I wish I could have drawn upon my students’ actual experiences. But the artificiality of the exercise seems not to have prevented most of my students from feeling some of the frustration and anxiety which can attend required codeswitching. The instructional sequence was not intended to change their minds about the importance of Standard English or the desirability of codeswitching. It was intended to help them think more carefully and perhaps differently about how it to be forced to learn and use a different form of language than one is used to. Overall, my students’ responses and reflections indicate that the sequence was successful.

“**We Lost That Comfort Zone**”

Teaching future teachers about diversity issues can be difficult. Some speakers of mainstream English find discussions of diversity personally threatening. McFalls & Cobb- Roberts argue that “the challenge that teacher educators face when there is resistance to diversity issues is to create alternative methods for introducing ideas that are threatening to students” (165). They advocate preparing students for “cognitive dissonance” by teaching them, in advance, about the dissonance they are likely to experience during discussions of diversity. I believe that their approach has merit. But I would contend—and I’m sure that McFalls and Cobb- Roberts would agree—that learning about diversity issues and carefully monitoring our responses to those issues won’t be enough. Prior to the “no e exercise,” my students, relatively well schooled (but not well practiced) in diversity, felt that codeswitching was an obvious and relatively problem-free approach to linguistic diversity in the classroom. They felt that it was the perfect way to honor the home codes while still teaching all students the power codes. Having had no experience with the potentially confounding difficulties of codeswitching, they were prepared simply...
to tell their future students to switch codes whenever the situation required it.

The “no e exercise” did not lead them to deny the importance of codeswitching, but in conjunction with the reading of some powerful firsthand accounts it revealed to them some of the dangers and difficulties of which they had previously been unaware. As one student noted, “We were all very comfortable writing the first paragraph (with e’s). Then, when we had to rewrite that paragraph, we lost that comfort zone. The simple task of writing, of communicating a very familiar story, became extremely difficult.” My hope is that the loss of the comfort zone will encourage future teachers to approach codeswitching much more carefully and more thoughtfully, with greater understanding of the alienation and frustration required codeswitching can engender.

Works Cited


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**Figure 1**  
*An Opinionnaire on “Standard English”*

1. I speak and write Standard English as my native dialect.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

2. Everyone in the United States should speak and write Standard English all the time.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

3. Standard English is the only acceptable language for commerce in the United States.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

4. Standard English is the only acceptable language for education in the United States.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

5. Speakers of non-standard dialects (like African-American Vernacular English and Spanish Influenced English) must be taught the Standard dialect of English so that they can succeed in school and in careers in the United States.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

6. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English instead of their native dialects is unnecessary.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

7. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English instead of their native dialects is potentially harmful.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

8. Forcing speakers of non-standard dialects to learn and use Standard English is actually a form of racism, a way of reinforcing the status quo which privileges everything that is white and middle-class.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

9. Non-native speakers of English who intend to stay in the United States should learn to speak and write English as soon as possible upon entering the country.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

10. The public schools should accommodate non-native speakers of English by providing bilingual education while the non-native speakers are learning English.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

11. Since the United States is already one of the largest Spanish-speaking countries in the world, we should be an officially bilingual nation.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*

12. English should be THE language of the United States.  
*Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree*
DIRECTIONS: READ EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SELECTIONS CAREFULLY. AFTER YOU FINISH, CIRCLE THE REACTION THAT BEST CORRESPONDS WITH YOUR PERSONAL REACTION TO THE READING.

EXAMPLE 1:

Students sit at tables in the media center, avidly reading copies of encyclopedia articles as they research topics for their research papers. They highlight most of the articles and copy the information word-for-word onto note cards. Then they sit down with the highlighted copies and thesauri, finding new words to replace some of the verbs in the original articles. As you give lessons about how to quote information and use in-text citation, they tune out. When you check in their outlines, their theses all look very similar: “In this report I am going to talk about —.”

A. Is this a horror movie preview? I want to run screaming from the media center.
B. This is slightly painful. I’d prefer a different scenario that doesn’t involve plagiarism.
C. This isn’t part of my dream picture, but it’s part of the research paper process.
D. Woo hoo! Give me more! I love it - when the thesis is that clear.

EXAMPLE 2:

Your students have been working on their research papers for the last few weeks. They just turned in their final copies, and you’ve hunkered down to grade a stack of them over the weekend. The first one was disappointing—poor sentence structure, no voice, and plagiarized sections. After giving the student a low grade, you look at the author’s name and remind yourself that this student didn’t work much during class time. You read the second paper. The monotone voice frustrates you, as does the choppy organization of the sentences and the unusual and uneven word choice. This student obviously used a thesaurus to replace different words from an encyclopedia since many of the new words are incorrect choices. This paper also scores low, and you are surprised to find out it belongs to your top writer.

After two hours of grading, the papers don’t get any better. You think maybe it’s because you didn’t teach them how to use voice well enough. But then you remember that their narratives and short stories were full of voice. You can’t chalk it up to having forced topics because each student got to choose something she or he was interested in. You just can’t shake how bad these papers are, and you don’t know how on earth you’re going to read fifty more extended five-paragraph essays that basically rephrase or plagiarize an encyclopedia or website.

A. This is my worst nightmare. Please end my misery now
B. I’ve been there, sister, and I’d like to avoid the situation at all costs.
C. This isn’t so bad. Besides, students need to write a research paper.
D. This is what I live for! Now I can use those 500 red pens I bought at Staples!

If you chose either “A” or “B” for both selections, you probably agree with me when I say that the traditional research paper no longer fits in an educational world emphasizing Best Practices. The process is relatively mindless: students pull some facts from a source and plug them into the extended-five-paragraph format, which is the equivalent of rewriting the information in its original format. The whole process becomes an enormous “busywork” assignment because students merely transfer facts from the encyclopedia to note cards, from note cards to an outline, from outline to a draft, and from draft to the final copy. Many don’t even bother to put the information in their own words, keeping a source’s original sentences and substituting a few larger words from a thesaurus here and there.

I think much of the problem is that the traditional research paper format doesn’t relate to what we cover in our literature-based classrooms. After all, how many research reports or formal essays do we read as a class? In my classes, rarely do we read anything formatted like an impersonal formal essay, with the thesis at the end of the first paragraph,
followed by the three points and a conclusion that restates the thesis. In fact, the only time I encounter formal essay writing is in my graduate classes; I don’t see it at all in my everyday reading. Because the traditional research paper follows this unfamiliar format, students don’t place any value in the assignment—and I can’t blame them. What we teachers need to decide, then, is whether the purpose of the research writing is to teach the format of the formal research paper or how to use research in writing. Personally, I believe the latter is much more important.

I’m not suggesting that we throw out research writing—because learning how to research and make judgments about the findings are very important skills. I am, however, suggesting that we replace the traditional research paper with something more relevant to what students learn throughout the year. In Methods That Matter, Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar propose that

[knowledge cannot remain external, inert, untouched. Learners must do something with information: connect it, draw it, weigh it, manipulate it— metaphorically, they need to grab ideas by the throat and demand that they make sense” (114).

As a teacher, I don’t want my students to merely memorize their research; I want them to analyze it and synthesize it. I don’t care if they can rewrite an encyclopedia word-for-word on a piece of paper. I want them to use their brains and wrestle with their research until it becomes a part of them.

My main goal as an English teacher is to help my students develop into better writers, and I find that the traditional research paper contradicts all that I teach and believe about writing. The impersonal format breeds voiceless regurgitation of facts. The objectivity of the assignment kills voice and stifles creativity. I want to hear my students’ voices in their writing, and I want to see them using skills and genres that we’ve covered throughout the year. I don’t teach students how to analyze and use suspense, dialogue, figurative language, characterization, and free verse just to abandon the skills once a unit is over. If I expect my students to develop these writing and analytical skills, then I need to offer more opportunities to use them, something that the traditional research paper format does not do. Therefore, in my American literature course, I have exchanged the old research assignment for a more functional one: the multi-genre research paper.

I have found that Tom Romano’s multi-genre paper works wonders as a replacement for the traditional research paper. The multi-genre paper is

a complex, multilayered, multivoiced blend of genres, each revealing information about [a] topic, each self-contained, making a point of its own, unconnected to other genres by conventional transitional device (Blending 4).

In my classroom, each student must research an American author, a task that includes finding biographical information and reading a book by the author, and write a project that includes the following parts: a preface; a review for the book the student read; an annotated bibliography; a non-textual piece; and four to six genres of the student’s choice, all tied together by a recurring image or theme. In the multi-genre research project, students use the information gathered from their research and the books they read to create snippets of their authors’ lives.

Romano’s multi-genre paper makes students craft their research in their own words, through multiple viewpoints and different genres. It requires higher-order thinking because students must create original pieces, which in turn eliminates the opportunity to plagiarize their sources. Students must make their writing and learning distinctly their own. They are expected to use voice and unity, as well as experiment with audience, point of view, and other literary devices that we cover throughout the year. Most importantly, the unique format asks students to go beyond the comfortable realm of voiceless, formulaic writing and asks them to put themselves on the line. This makes both writing and learning more challenging, more interesting, and more meaningful, in addition to acknowledging “that there are many ways to see the world, many ways to show others what we see” (Romano Writing, 130).

Reproducing research in the traditional research paper format is not enough for today’s world. Students need to understand that research—and life—involves more than objective fact analysis. As Romano states in Blending Genres, Altering Style, “No matter what professions [students] enter, facts and analysis are not enough. If our decisions are to be both sound and humane, we need to understand emotion and
circumstance, as well as logic and outcome. Writing in many
genres helps minds learn to do that” (57). We need to help our
students think in both the objective and subjective worlds as
they research and write in order to help them become creative
problem-solvers.

My students have loved the multi-genre research
paper. One student told me that “this is the most exciting and
fun report I have ever done.” Another student complained
that he had never worked so hard on a paper before in his
life—and that he was thrilled with the results. He is now an
avid reader of Charles Baxter (the author he researched) and
continues to seek out information about his author’s life. A
female student hoped she would get another chance to write
a multi-genre paper during the next school year, and one of
her classmates said he really appreciated being able to use
his research in a “more creative and way more interesting”
format. Another student told me that she felt she “finally
understood how to condense [her] writing and use details in
poetry.” Those comments, along with over half of my students
urging me to convert other teachers to this type of research
writing, were very reassuring.

Do not think for a moment that I didn’t have students
who disliked the project. There were a number of students
who disagreed with research writing in general, regardless
of the format. I also had a few students wish they could have
written the traditional research report. One student explained
that she preferred traditional papers because she didn’t have
to go back and think about the things we learned earlier in
the year. Another specifically said, “I wish we wrote regular
research papers. This paper made me think too hard, and I
don’t usually think much when I write research reports.” To
me, these comments, in addition to the amazing work they
turned in as their final projects, validate the multi-
genre paper: students are thinking, creating from research, becoming
better writers, and taking ownership and pride in their work. What more could a teacher want?

For those who are willing to throw out the traditional
research paper for something more meaningful, I suggest
reading Tom Romano’s Blending Genre, Altering Style:
Writing Multigenre Papers. This book is my Bible

as I begin my fourth year of teaching the multi-
genre research paper. It offers ideas for explaining, planning,
teaching, and grading the project, as well as supplemental mini- lessons. He also includes elementary, secondary, and
post-secondary examples of multi-genre papers that can be
shown to students as models. The nice thing about Romano’s
book is that his clear instructions and examples read more
like a story than an educational text. The chapters correlate to
different parts of the project, making it easy to quickly review
a section before teaching it.

Switching to this style of reporting has made the
research assignment much more worthwhile and valuable than
the traditional format. I reap the benefits because I read sixty
original projects in sixty different formats, all showcasing
different aspects of authors’ lives. Between genre choice
and different perspectives of a person’s life, even multiple
research projects on one author are ever alike. Students,
however, have the better end of the deal. They create the
layout of their report, so they can incorporate genres that
emphasize their writing strengths or they can experiment
with genres they’ve he obviously did a lot of research and
found some always wanted to try. They evaluate their research
and choose those sections that are most interesting, rather
than trying to rehash everything they know about an author.
They also take a more active role in their learning by asking
questions about genre, style, punctuation, and grammar when
they are ready to learn it and use it.

If you aren’t convinced that the multi-genre project is
for you, let me share just one more scenario with you. Again,
circle the reaction that is closest to yours.

EXAMPLE 3:

I sit at my dining room table grading multigenre
papers. The first one is about Walt Whitman ad the phrase
“Leaves of Grass” connects the whole project. It includes an
interview with the poet about how his life appears in Leaves
of Grass, an editorial about Song of Myself a narrative about
visiting soldiers in a hospital, and a poem about Whitman
writing Leaves of Grass. Then I open the plastic case at
the back of the folder and put the CD in my CD player. A
beautiful guitar melody floats out of the speakers, reminding
me of sitting on the beach at Lake Michigan in the evening.
The song, written and performed by my student, is a musical
rendition of Whitman’s poem “Song at Sunset.” I’m amazed,
but not surprised because this is one of my top students.

Much later, I grade a paper by one of my students who
regularly resists every writing and reading assignment we
have. I open his project on Edgar Allan Poe with the hope that he fulfilled all of the basic requirements of the project. He starts off with an intricate and shadowy charcoal drawing of a cemetery and what he imagines Poe’s gravestone looks like, followed with an obituary. The rest of the project has a flashback feel that focuses on the tragedies in Poe’s life. There are a number of journal entries about fighting depression after his wife’s death, a dialogue between him and his adoptive father after getting kicked out of West Point, and a short story about the dark voices inspiring his stories. Not only did this student do the required writing, but kind of connection with his author as well. The writing was full of such melancholy, fitting perfectly with the brooding picture of Poe on the cover of the report. I am thrilled by this student’s progress, and am eager to see the next project reveals about both the student and the researched author. Unfortunately, I only have ten more projects left to grade.

A. Original writing? Kids getting into their research?
   Working with themes? Sign me up!
B. This sound more interesting to read, and the examples are intriguing. It’s worth a try.
C. Sounds like I have to do too much thinking as I’m grading. No thanks.
D. No thesis? No cookie cutter organization? No regurgitation? No way!

With this project, the students really do immerse themselves their research and take ownership for their education. They are eager to try new styles of writing, to showcase their writing strengths, and to show off what they learned about their authors and writing. To me, this is what teaching is all about—making learning relevant and real.

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**Works Cited**


This is the story of what a third-grade child and an undergraduate education student taught me about teaching language arts. While I always look to learn from my students, I am more surprised at some times than at others about what I find. Theo*, in the innocent, matter-of-fact logic of a nine-year-old and Patti*, one of my undergraduate students preparing for a career in teaching, wrote collaboratively once a week for five weeks. Their struggle with writing about September 11, 2001 helped me see that both language and silence should be part of my teaching. (*All names are pseudonyms.)

For the past several years, I have taught reading and language arts methods courses to pre-service teachers. My approach is to spend the first half of the semester helping my students become active writers. Reading the work of such writing educators as Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, Donald Graves, Shelley Harwayne, and Donald Murray, my students experience a writer’s workshop in our classroom. Students must keep a writer’s notebook that includes a range of attempts at various genres, topics, and literary devices. The emphasis in the notebook, as I tell my students, is to write freely, whatever comes to mind as they explore poetry, essay, story, and memoir. I expect my students not to be great writers but to be active writers in order to teach others about writing. Throughout their focus on writing, we have conversations about the integration of speaking, listening, and reading. Each facet of the course emphasizes the use of language and methods for fostering its use in the classroom.

I am no longer surprised by my student’s fears and resistance to writing. Many are convinced they know only how to write academically, for their teacher, in response to an assignment. Few have been expected to manage the freedom of writing whatever is on their minds. They spend the first several weeks complaining they have nothing to write about and stop just short of begging me to assign them a writing topic. I am firm in my refusal. As so many writers reveal in Murray’s Shoptalk, writers write in order to figure out what is on their minds. If I were to assign a topic, not only would I rob them of the work of the writer, but I would risk having students writing for me feeling little, perhaps no, ownership of their writing. So in order to inspire each writer to write, we read, I share my messiest writing and conduct think-alouds, and we engage in whole class and peer conferencing. Without fall, by the end of the semester, every student has produced a quality piece of writing he or she is willing to publish in our class anthology.

The second half of the semester involves working at an urban elementary school. After learning about themselves as writers, my students are expected to engage in collaborative writing with a third grader. The writing partners, one undergraduate with one third grader, must explore a range of topics and genres culminating in one piece of writing for publication in a class anthology.

As for their field placement, I hear a different, but consistent, set of questions and concerns from my students. Do we really let the children write about whatever they want? Will they have something to write about? How will I get them to write? After the first 45-minute session at the elementary school, my students discover the same joy and struggle they know from their own writing experience but, this time, witnessed through the eyes of a third grader.

Last fall, my class met for the first time on September 4th. The next time we saw one another was the day after September 11th. Though we hardly knew one another, I expected to hear a need from my students to connect and try to make sense of this incredible event. They were silent. I respected their unwillingness to share their reactions, but it worried me. I know there is a role for silence in both learning and healing. I also know that silence, like a wound left unchecked, can fester and cause even deeper pain.

This language arts class is intended to help students realize the power of language in exploring and understanding oneself and the world. I needed to open the door to writing about the event so I suggested a whole class composition. We created a brief poem that centered on patriotism, and nothing else was said the rest of the semester. My students worked with their third-grade writing partners producing a range of stories and poetry. None of it related to September 11th.

The following semester, a new year underway, a new group of students and the familiar angst of their first weeks of
writing, no one spoke — or wrote of September 11th, When it came time to begin their work with the third grade students, I asked my students to exchange written reflections of their observations about their field work with fellow classmates. These conversations took place over e-mail with students sharing observations, questions, and concerns twice weekly.

During the second week of writing, one of my students reported that she couldn’t get her third grader off the topic of September 11th. Patti wrote, “Things are going good with Theo except he’s stuck on writing about Sept. 11’, I don’t want to discourage him but I want to move on. I originally thought that this could be our publishable piece but I don’t want to dwell on that. Next week I hope to get him on a new topic.”

In her e-mail discussion group, Patti’s colleagues offered suggestions about how to move Theo away from his chosen topic. One student expressed her belief that “sometimes if someone feels so strongly about something they feel a need to talk or write about it.” She went on to suggest, however, that Patti direct Theo toward writing about heroes or firefighters instead. Another student responded, “When you and your students write about Sept. 11, do any other topics stick in your mind that both of you could talk about or relate to?” Each of Patti’s colleagues was trying to help her get Theo writing about something other than what he wanted to write about.

I was disappointed in Patti’s, and her colleagues’, reactions to this third grader’s desire to write. Were my students not understanding what I was trying to teach them? Why were they thinking of ways to steer this child away from what he felt interested in writing about instead of helping him put his thoughts and feelings into language? Having a child express a desire to write, and pay sustained attention to the writing, is a dream come true for a language arts teacher! Why was she not encouraging this youngster’s interest? Was she silencing him? I decided not to pose these questions to Patti just yet, believing she would learn more if I remained an observer, not a participant, in her writing with Theo.

During the next two sessions, Theo and Patti drafted a poem. As in any collaboration, they negotiated as they wrote and revised trying to arrive at something they both agreed to (see fig. 1). During their last writing session, Theo was absent from school, and Patti was left to make any last revisions and edit the poem for publication. At the end of the five weeks, Patti and Theo published their poem about September 11th, “Disaster,” in the class anthology (see fig. 2).

I decided to interview both writers, separately, about their shared writing experience. I asked Patti what made her uncomfortable writing about September 11th. She explained that Theo wanted to write about the sound that the people made when they were jumping from the tower. “I was very uncomfortable with the fact that he was focusing on such a negative thing. I wasn’t sure how to get him away from that. Then I just decided that he needed to talk about that so I did and we simply stated it in our poem, not with detail because I told him that was a horrible way to die and we didn’t need to focus on that part of the tragedy.” She later emphasized that she made revisions to the poem that didn’t go into great detail, but everyone got the message and understood how she and Theo felt about the event.

When I asked Theo about September 11th he explained that he was worried about it but expected everything to be okay by Thanksgiving. He had written about this in his journal at school shortly after the tragedy. Theo went on to say that, after Thanksgiving, “I thought everybody would forget about it but they didn’t.” After seeing a television show about the tragic events, he wanted to write. When asked why he wrote about September 11th, Theo said, “These days nobody will listen if something bad happens. From both these writers, I have a deepened respect for both language and silence. The moms and dads are too busy to listen […] sometime people will listen to writing.” My last query to this child was about how he felt after writing this piece. Theo replied, “I feel glad just to let it go. If I didn’t let it go it would stick on my chest.”

When considering the different needs of these two writers, I am left wondering about the power of language. Theo, needing to be heard and to let go of the horror of this event, knows the relief that comes from writing about that which is “stuck on his chest.” Patti, admitting she wanted to avoid focussing on the detail of the event, understands that writing and reading about something can be almost as real as living through it. In many ways, her unwillingness to put something into words spoke just as strongly about her response to the event as if she had expressed it.

From both these writers, I have a deepened respect for both language and silence. While putting thoughts, observations, and feelings into words offers
solace and healing for some, others find the vividness of language to be too much. I am wondering, for all my advocacy and love of language, whether silence plays an equally important role in my teaching of the language arts. It seems to me that, because words hold such power, silence may have something to teach us about language, as well.

Works Cited


This essay in tribute of Ray Lawson is a fitting conclusion for this special issue celebrating twenty years of LAJM.

Whatever the question, the first answer never fails to be: “Ask Ray, he’ll know.” Whether the question is about the policy, history, or finances of Michigan Council of Teachers of English, Ray is the go-to guy. Additionally, if you want to know about Michigan school legislation or collective bargaining, you need only to contact Ray. Or, if you want to know about pedagogical issues affecting the profession like testing or censorship, then again Ray is a terrific resource. It occurred to me that although there are hundreds of us who do know Ray and his contributions, there are also some who may not know him, and I hope that this article helps remedy that situation.

So, who is this man, Ray H. Lawson? For me, it seems like I’ve always known him. In many ways—at least professionally—I suppose that I have. He was already MCTE secretary-treasurer when I came into the profession. Do you remember always seeing that same distinguished looking man sitting at the MCTE Conference registration table? Well, that is Ray, and that’s how I also first came to know him.

Beyond being the person I send my membership renewal and conference registration to, Ray contributes much, much more. I have had the benefit of knowing Ray for more than thirty years, and he continues to serve as a role model for me. His thoughtful ways, his up-to-date and informed teaching, and his quiet, unassuming leadership style come from his 64 years of teaching, probably making him the longest serving teacher in Michigan. He recently retired from the Rochester Public Schools, but that doesn’t mean that he’s stopped teaching.

Graduating from Central Michigan University in 1940 with a major in English and history, Ray began his long-serving career in the public schools. Since that time, except for serving in the military during WWII, Ray continued to teach high school English fulltime for 64 years and served as senior class advisor for over 45 years. He continues to serve the profession in many leadership roles. Having recently celebrated his 88th birthday, he continues to serve as secretary/treasurer of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, a position he has held for over thirty years.

As a teacher, Ray is without rival, and his numerous awards speak to his outstanding abilities. His principal, colleagues, and students all speak to his effectiveness in the classroom. He is not only liked, but respected. His standards are high, his courses demanding, but never does he forget that the student is the focus of his attention. I know of no other teacher who has been honored by his/her school district in the manner that Rochester Public Schools honored Ray in 2001, when hundreds of his former students traveled from all over the country to pay tribute to the man who had such a profound influence on them. The Ray Lawson Quality Improvement Fund was established in his name to provide funds for staff development in the Rochester Community Schools.

The Rochester Schools have benefited from Ray serving on, and often chairing, virtually every curricular committee there. He has been chair of the English department since 1948. Moreover, he has served as the chair of the K-12 Education for the ‘80s, the 7-12 Language Arts coordinator, and co-chair of the Instructional Technology Committee. On the state level, Ray continues to work with the Michigan Department of Education as a member of the State Writing Committee, the MEAP Writing Assessment Committee, and the State Advisory Committee for Basic Skills.

As a professional, Ray Lawson has also been recognized by his colleagues. He has won many awards, both public and professional. Best known to me are the Charles Carpenter Fries Award from the Michigan Council of Teachers of English in 1984 and the PTA Educational Service Award in 1997. The Fries Award is named after the first president of
MCTE, who had such an important role in the development of the organization. The award recognizes individuals for:

1. Long and faithful service to the profession of English teaching
2. Distinguished leadership not only in his or her own community but also at the state and/or national level
3. Inspirational qualities for students and colleagues
4. Originality in some form, having his or her own special stamp or way
5. Academic superiority

Most recently, Ray was doubly honored by Michigan Council of Teachers of English by being named the inaugural recipient of The Ray H. Lawson Excellence in Teaching Award (2002). He also received the CMU Distinguished Alumni Award in 2003 and the NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence Award in 2003.

In addition to his association with MCTE, Ray has also maintained memberships and leadership roles in numerous other professional and civic organizations, including the MEA, Michigan Interscholastic Press Association, and Michigan Association of Professions. As president of the Michigan Education Association (MEA), Ray was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the collective bargaining law for teachers and the teacher tenure law—two huge changes for the teaching profession and the organization. After his term as president, Ray continued to serve for fifteen years on the MEA Board of Directors.

If you didn’t know anything about Ray Lawson’s achievements, when you get to know him, a sense of the man comes through. For me, there will always be some things about Ray that stand out: He is the consummate professional. He ALWAYS dresses professionally, and by professional, I don’t mean anything non-denim or that he ignores casual Fridays. I mean he always wears a suit or sportcoat, shirt and tie—the works! Casual for him is to skip the tie. He ALWAYS speaks and writes thoughtfully. He offers perspective rather than criticism and because of his longevity that perspective always includes history. He is responsible, highly organized, informed, and prepared. He ALWAYS puts others before himself. His graciousness is evident as a teacher, a professional, a friend. He ALWAYS is hopeful and positive and enjoys life.

Let me share an anecdote that, for me, epitomizes Ray. The one thing you really need to know about Ray is that he’s always prepared. He always does his research and never is caught short. So—when we attended the CMU Alumni Dinner in Mt. Pleasant a few years ago so that Ray could accept the CMU Distinguished Alumni Award, he was there to enjoy and savor the occasion. A table had been reserved for him, his children, and their families. I, too, had the pleasure of joining that table having been asked to make Ray’s introduction.

Well, Ray had graduated from CMU in 1940, and so I didn’t think that he would know too many people at the event, and I was all ready to introduce him to those I knew in attendance. Silly me. It seemed that people were lining up to speak with Ray. They were former classmates, former students, or current friends. If they didn’t already know him, they seemed to know of him, whether they were judges, business leaders, or teachers. We settled down for a nice dinner and as we enjoyed dessert, the program began. The first person to be recognized that evening for achievement was called to the podium. The person responsible for giving the introduction did so and then the guest stepped forward and proceeded to give a short speech. Ray and I immediately looked at each other with concern, for neither of us was aware that Ray was to do anything but accept the award. A speech was definitely not on the radar. Too late now, the program was underway, and Ray gave me a quiet shrug and a smile as the program proceeded. I looked at him again, and at first glance, he was calm and attentive. However, I could see in his eyes that his mind was going a million miles an hour constructing his response.

There were two more presentations before we were called to the dais, and my heart was pounding as I gave my prepared introduction—one that I’d spent all week crafting—all the time wondering how Ray would meet this challenge. I should have known. Poised and in control, Ray stepped to the podium and delivered one of the most eloquent and gracious speeches of the evening—without a notecard in sight. I was—and still am—in awe of him.

I have many more stories that I could share with you about Ray and the impact that he has had on my own career, but there are plenty of others who can do the same. When I sent out the initial description of this article and what I wanted to include in it to a number of colleagues who had worked closely with Ray through MCTE over the years and asked them to contribute, the response was immediate. Almost instantly, people started sending me their own favorite
anecdotes, impressions, or memories. All were personal and compelling. I was struck, too, by their similarities. Rather than picking and choosing, cutting and pasting them together, I’ve decided to include them all in a collage of tribute. Read them for yourself, and I think that if you don’t already know Ray, you will come to know him through these following stories.

I remember meeting Ray Lawson in 1986. Having just moved to Michigan, I had gone to the Fall MCTE Conference with Kathy Drzick, my English Education colleague and mentor at WMU. Kathy had served as president of MCTE, and she seemed to know, and introduce me to, everybody there. But for some reason, I especially remember meeting Ray Lawson that day. He was distinguished looking, and Kathy had mentioned that he was an important leader within the MCTE board and that he had also been the president of the Michigan Education Association.

I eventually joined the MCTE Board, first as Region VIII representative, then as vice president, president, and past president. During those years I came to know Ray as patient and wise. He was a steady leader, who faithfully served as an effective “guide on the side” rather than as a “sage on the stage.” He was content to let the current leaders lead. But he was ready to speak up passionately when the rest of us seemed to be losing sight of what was most important for students.

MCTE Board meetings always featured a lot of discussion—about upcoming events, about leadership, about curriculum, and about State issues. Ray always listened hard, but occasionally we would be stunned into silence when he exploded in disgust about some nonsensical mandate at the state or national level. He was always right, and we loved him for it.

In the Fall of 1992 MCTE faced a dilemma we had never encountered before. The State legislators had mandated a high school proficiency test that all Michigan students would need to pass in order to be awarded a diploma. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction had decided to invite four professional organizations—Michigan Council of Teachers of English, Michigan Reading Association, Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the Michigan Science Teachers’ Association—to each work under contract to design one of the four high school tests. Oh, what an MCTE Board meeting we had, one of my first as incoming MCTE president, when we discussed this volatile issue! The test results would deny some students a high school diploma, and we could hardly bear to think of that outcome. But the legislature had already acted, and an expert panel of psychometricians had already been convened to recommend a process for test development. At MCTE we hated the prospect of doing potential harm, but we knew that somebody would agree to design the test. In the end, MCTE decided it was better to be at the table, better to have a voice, and better to design a test that would give all student writers a good shot at passing the writing proficiency test.

Ray was there at every step—managing the financial affairs as a dozen or so of us spent countless planning weekends, often at the Harley Hotel in East Lansing. He was there with the leadership experience we needed when some of us reached the limits of our own experience. And he was there when we met with the attorney hired by the MEAP office to challenge the emerging design of our assessments. Always he provided a steady, knowledgeable voice of experience. And always he spoke with keen insight, nudging us to do what was right for students and for the teaching of English. And today he still always believes the best about students and about English teachers. And he encourages the rest of us to move toward that light.

Ellen Brinkley, Professor of English and Director, Third Coast Writing Project Western Michigan University MCTE past president, 1993

If someone told me, “Did you hear that MCTE shut down? I guess Ray Lawson retired” I’d be disappointed—I want to see MCTE go on and on—but I wouldn’t necessarily be surprised. The organization and the man are so entwined in my mind that it’s hard for me to separate them. I met Ray too late in my life for him to become the man I wanted to be when I grew up, but he’s certainly been the man I would like to have morphed into. His quiet wit and consistent temperament and reliable presence have suggested to me that, in some things, the center can hold. Wouldn’t it be nice to be someone who not only makes the day brighter but also makes it seem more secure? Wouldn’t it be nice to be thought of as “the Ray Lawson” of your organization? Or to hear someone say, “In situations like that, I simply call upon my inner Ray Lawson” and know that whoever heard you would know what you meant and wish they could do the same? I think it would.

Bob Root
MCTE Past President, 1982
There are so many words that describe Ray Lawson as an English educator and as a member of MCTE: “dedicated” is highlighted in my mind. When Ray talked about teaching, I remember that it was about students’ needs and interests. I don’t remember his ever fussing over working conditions or injustices or current stupidities in the profession which consumed the interest of some of us. He worked diligently with his local school district, I understand, and I saw first hand his conscientious work for the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, keeping financial and membership records, attending board meetings with accurate reports in hand, quietly stating a reasoned point of view on issues, showing up early to provide a helping hand when we were organizing for a conference. I wasn’t sure that he should be helping the Michigan Department of Education escalate testing of Language Arts in Michigan schools, but I knew he would work well with those people, trying to get the best standards possible within the state mandates, and also the most reasonable test content and procedures.

Another memory of Ray glows in my mind. Ray often was accompanied by his wife when he attended MCTE conferences. They seemed to be such a fine couple, always concerned with each other. I enjoyed seeing them together. I’m sure the years since her death have not been easy for him.

I’m sure that Ray’s interests and talents will find good use in retirement. I hope that, like me, he finds retirement a busy and happy way to live.

Sheila Fitzgerald
MCTE Past President, 1983

Elsewhere in this issue of LAJM, I refer to “the astonishingly-reliable Ray Lawson” who, with a few select others, constituted for me as a new member of the organization back in the mid-1980’s “the soul of MCTE – and, on occasion, its conscience.” So it was then, and so it remains today. I was especially grateful for Ray’s quiet, unflappable constancy 20-plus years ago when I dove into the then-roiling waters of the MCTE totally clueless as to what I was getting myself into. Actually, my discovering Ray was the result of a mistake. So that the organization wouldn’t look so, um, gender-imbalanced in its governing body, the MCTE Executive Board wanted a male name on the ballot next to the shoo-in female candidate for Vice-President. Mine was a male name, albeit quite unknown. So, after being assured I would not win, I agreed to run. Uh-huh. And thus did Ray Lawson become for me, as he had (and has) for so many others over the years, the most important member of the MCTE – especially when some unfortunate events dramatically accelerated my movement within the Executive Board. You might say I ascended out of my depth. Organization politics at the time were tense, on occasion even fractious. The participants were good-willed and well-intentioned, mind you; they just often willed and intended different things for the organization. In times like that, it is easy for a designated leader to offend. And when you worry too much about that (as rookies are prone to do), your judgment can be suspect, uncertain. I was ill-prepared to deal with this. But in Ray Lawson’s non-judgmental accessibility as well as his steadfastness to the ideals of the organization I found both direction and comfort. To be sure, Ray had his opinions, his principles, his passions. But — then as now — he also exercised restraint, the ability to defer to what he felt was, overall, the forward progress of the organization. When around Ray Lawson, I always felt the way was clear, the vision good, the prognosis positive. A rookie couldn’t have asked for more. Once more, Ray, I thank you.

John Dinan
Past President, 1985

When I was somewhere along the president elect, president, past-president route in MCTE, I remember that we’d had a rotating secretary/treasurer, people who did their best, but who passed through the position so quickly that the finances were really never sorted out. I can’t remember if this was an elected or appointed position. What I do remember is when Ray came into the position, the finances got sorted out, we started getting clear and accurate information about what we were doing, and we somehow had more money that we’d had before. I can’t remember why. It might have had something to do with some sort of magic Ray brought with him. The stability he provided for the organization was certainly a magic we needed.

Susan Tchudi
MCTE Past President, 1981
I have no funny Ray story—but would like to comment that throughout all my work with MCTE, Ray was the one constant—always helpful, always professional, always positive. I appreciated his hard work, able assistance, and friendly manner more than I can say. He is, indeed, a great man!

Mary Harmon
MCTE Past President, 2000

I first met Ray Lawson when I became a board member of MCTE. I was amazed that someone who had been in the profession for so long did not follow the “traditional” rules of teaching English. Instead, Ray immediately inspired me that a teacher can stay current on research and best practices throughout his or her entire career. I will never forget Ray telling about how he “rebelled” and did not follow the traditional rule for commas in a series. This was typical of Ray—he was ahead of his time for something that is accepted and used widely today. I enjoyed my time on the MCTE board with Ray, and his advice and calm manner helped me through a huge conference and a year of many changes. He is truly an exceptional person.

Julia Reynolds
MCTE Past President, 2003

One vivid memory I have is of Ray before the Executive Committee meetings passing out the financial report and last month’s minutes in his quiet and efficient manner.

Ray’s dry sense of humor is also widely known. One particular quote that demonstrates his dry sense of humor was one he said many times during his financial report, “It never ceases to amaze me how English teachers can write bad checks.”

Ron Iwankovitsch
MCTE Past President, 2001

As a kid I remember my dad having his students turn in their note cards, outlines, and finally their “term papers.” The students had that day to get them in (on the due date), but the big thing was that he accepted the papers up until midnight of that day. There was many a night that students would be driven by their parents to drop off the papers, and they would ring the doorbell at 11:59 p.m. just to be on time. Boy, did this make my mom mad, but Dad was a very accommodating teacher to every student that he ever had. He was tough, but very fair. I made it through his class by the skin of my teeth (C+), but my college freshman class was a breeze. Thanks, Dad.

Taryn Sabo
Daughter of Ray Lawson
Elementary Section Chair of MCTE

With a team, my son Christopher was working on the Professional Registry for the Michigan Department of Education when he asked us about our friend Ray Lawson. The Registry was to be the comprehensive data base on Michigan educators. Districts were to submit information from their data files to the state for melding into a state-wide data base.

The shake-out of the Registry was not going well, but the team was able to locate the problem in the data field that was set up to accept “years of teaching experience.” They had set up the field with date parameter, and when they ran the data they would receive an “error!” note.

Christopher called us. He had met Ray many times through our council activities and, when he found the “source” of the error was this one person whose teaching dates were outside of their reasonable years of work parameters, Ray Lawson’s name came up. Could this be true? “Yes,” we said. “Give him a plaque.” One that says he is the best friend Michigan English teachers will ever have.

Ronald N. Kar
MCTE Past President, 1984
November, 2003

It was a wonderful morning for breakfast with the cool San Francisco air making us hurry to our destination. But we weren’t going to miss this moment. NCTE President-Elect Patti Stock was to address the affiliate breakfast at the 2003 NCTE annual conference. As a fellow Michigander, Patti had the opportunity to put Michigan in the spotlight a bit, and she had asked us what we wanted her to include. We knew right away what it would be. Now, the moment had arrived, and we were so excited we were there early.

A group from Michigan found a table right up front and in the very front sat Ray Lawson, Secretary-Treasurer of MCTE, and a member of MCTE for so long that his teaching career spanned more years than any of us, even we “older” ones, had lived. Ray’s daughter, Taryn, had accompanied us to San Francisco and was on pins and needles knowing what was to come.

As the end of her report neared, Patti began to talk about how NCTE was family, how we supported one another and how, through our organization, we became one another’s solace and cheering squad throughout our career journeys. Then she began talking about one stellar journey, one that had spanned many decades, and finally, she let the audience know that there in their midst was a man in his eighties who had been teaching in the classroom for over 60 years and was still teaching to that day. She asked Ray to stand. He did, he stood and looked at her as she applauded, but we got his attention. “Ray,” we said, “Ray, turn around.” Ray slowly turned and what he saw was the entire room, hundreds of teachers and future teachers standing and applauding an unbelievable career and a great teacher. We all left that breakfast with tears in our eyes.

That evening we walked to a wonderful Thai restaurant. Joined by others who had known Ray in his many years as Secretary/Treasurer of MCTE, we ate heartily and drank merrily, toasting Ray and his achievements. It was a great day from breakfast to dinner—one none of us will ever forget—because a man we admired was given a tribute that was well deserved.

Jill VanAntwerp
MCTE Past President, 2005

It’s difficult to decide which metaphor to use when describing Ray Lawson as Mr. MCTE. Cornerstone? Memory Bank? Financial wizard? Mentor? Humorist? All of the above. Those of us who served on the executive board at various times over the past 30 years know what a gem of a secretary/treasurer he has been:

- Need to figure out how to providing funding support for a local teachers’ group? Ask Ray.
- Need to know who the NCTE liaison of MCTE was in 1973? Check with Ray.
- Need to know how to get the best quick results from NCTE, the parent organization? Ray will know.
- Need to do some creative financial planning? Ray’s an expert.
- Need to understand the complexity of writing instruction before the current theories were in operation? Ray’s the man—understanding and supporting student writing long before the writing process was institutionalized.
- Need to negotiate the volatile political terrain of mandated writing assessments? Ray’s the model.
- Need to learn how to do it all with wit, grace, and the right kind of toughness? That’s Ray in a nutshell.

Ray is an institution. We’d clone him if we could. We’ll settle, though, for having served with him, worked with him, learned from him, and counted him as a friend, a mentor, a colleague, and one of the finest writing teachers in the state.

Marilyn Wilson
MCTE Past President, 1996

Conclusion
Throughout his long career, Ray has modeled for all of us the importance of lifelong learning. Rochester estimates that there have been more than 18,000 students who have passed through his classroom. During his over thirty years with MCTE, he has come in contact with thousands more teachers, yet there is no real way to determine the actual number of students, classroom teachers, and others who have benefited from Ray’s dedication and generosity. Selfless and unassuming, he leads by example, and his legendary influence is felt nationwide. Clearly, Ray Lawson exemplifies all that is great about classroom teachers.

Thanks, Ray, from all of us—for everything!

Susan Steffel
MCTE Past President, 2004
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Executive Committee of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English

President
Fred Barton
Michigan State University
bartonf@msu.edu

President-Elect
Sarah Welch
Ovid-Elsie High School
welchs@edzone.net

Vice-President and NCTE Liaison
Mary Anna Kruch
Grand Valley State University
kruchm@gvsu.edu

Past President
Maureen Baker
Tri-County High School
mbaker@tricountyschools.com

Secretary/Treasurer
Ray Lawson
Retired
rlawson48309@yahoo.com

College Chair
Laura Renzi-Keeler
Central Michigan University
Renzi11@cmich.edu

Secondary School Chair
Lori Yegge
Clarkston High School
Yeggea@clarkston.k12.mi.us

Middle School Chair
Kathy Vogel
Crossroads Middle School
KVogel@nvps.net

Elementary School Chair
Taryn D. Sabo
Holy Family Elementary School
taryn1014@yahoo.com

Urban/Diversity Chair
Julie Mix
Wayne State University
j.mix@wayne.edu

LAJM Co-Editors
Jonathan Bush
Western Michigan University
jonathan.bush@wmich.edu

MET Co-Editors
Mary M. Hall
Laura F. Osborn High School
ShamarPub02@aol.com

Troy Hicks
Michigan State University
hickstro@msu.edu

Guest Editors SS 06
Jill VanAntwerp, GVSU
Sue Steffel, CMU
Robert Rozema, GVSU

Regional Coordinators
Region I
Janice Schmidt
Dearborn High School
schmidtj@dearborn.k12.mi.us

Region II
Ann Ransford
Caro High School
aransford@centurytel.net

Region III
Sue Kohfeldt
Milan High School
kohfeldt@milan.k12.mi.us

Region IV
Nancy Joseph
Oakland University
joseph@oakland.edu

Kimme Knuckles
Baker College
kimmeknuckles@baker.edu

Region V
Vacant

Region VI
Rita Maddox
Gratiot-Isabella RESD
wjmaddox1@comcast.net

Region VII
Toby Kahn-Loftus
Central Michigan University
tobyteach@aol.com

Region VIII
Nancy Patterson
Grand Valley State University
patterna@gvsu.edu

Region IX
Webmaster
Rob Patin
Tri-County High School
rpatin@tricountyschools.com

Region X
Toby Kahn-Loftus
Central Michigan University
tobyteach@aol.com

Region XI
Tom Hyslop
Kia Richmond
Northern Michigan University
thyslop@nmu.edu
krichmon@nmu.edu

Membership
Bridgitt Gardner
Success Academy, Hill Center
mctemembership@hotmail.com

Michigan Youth Arts
Festival Liaison
Susan Garza
Atherton High School
sgarza@athertonschools.com

Student Affiliate
Jennifer Wolfin
Michigan State University
wolfinje@msu.edu

Michigan Department of
Education Liaison
Lynnette VanDyke
English Language Arts Consultant
VanDykel@michigan.gov

For the latest information about MCTE, please visit our web site at www.mienglishteacher.org
Bright Ideas Pre-Conference and Conference
April 13 and 14, 2007
Michigan State University
8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Please use a separate form for each person registering.

Name: ___________________________________________________ School: ______________________

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Conference Registration Options

**Friday, April 13 (Optional Workshops)**
Half-day, Hands-on Workshops Teaching ELA/Literacy Through Technology in Bessey Hall

- Only $25 for TWO different 3-hour, hands-on workshops on Friday
- Free continental breakfast, boxed lunch, and materials!
- Sessions will be filled on a first-come, first-served basis
- Must register for the Bright Ideas Conference on Saturday to be eligible
- No on-site registrations available

A. Blogging and Podcasting (All Levels)
B. Digital Storytelling – (All Levels)
   *Note: Digital Storytelling is a full day session.*
C. Of Secondary Worlds: Using MOOs and Second Life in English Language Arts (6-12)
D. Hooking Writers with New Literacies (K-8)
E. Teaching English in a Digital Age (6-12)
F. Reading and Writing Graphic Novels (6-12)
G. Teaching Collaborative Writing Using Web-based Tools (All Levels)

1st Choice: ____________________________
2nd Choice: ____________________________
3rd Choice: ____________________________

**Saturday, April 14 (Conf. Registration)**
Bright Ideas Conference at the MSU Union

Please choose from the following three registration rates:

- Regular Registration: $35 ____
- Presenter: $30 ____
- Undergrad/Intern/Volunteer: $25 ____
- Luncheon: Veg. ____ OR Regular ____ $25 ____

Note: A limited number of additional seats to hear the luncheon presenters will be available for those who do not attend the luncheon.

Friday (Optional Wkshp) Subtotal: ($25)____
Saturday Subtotal: $ ____
**Total Fee (Friday + Saturday):** $ _____

On-site Registration will be $40 for everyone.

Please make your check payable to the English Conference Fund and mail it with this completed form (postmarked) by **April 6, 2007**, to:

Bright Ideas Conference
The Writing Center
300 Bessey Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824

Receipt of registration form and payment will be acknowledged by e-mail.
CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

The editors of Language Arts Journal of Michigan, a publication of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, invite articles for the FALL 2007 issue on the topic of

Technology and the Teaching of English Language Arts"
Submission Date: July 1, 2007
http://www.mieenglishteacher.org/publications.htm

Colleagues:

New technologies continue to develop at a rapid pace, and we often wonder, “How can these potential resources help students learn? In terms of technology, what should students have access to, and for what purposes? How should teachers incorporate these tools with students into the curriculum?”

The Fall 2007 issue of LAJM will provide opportunities for teachers at all grade levels, teacher educators, teacher-researchers, and administrators to offer perspectives and examples of how “technology” is shaping or reshaping their instruction of students in English language arts. Since the burgeoning technology field is so diverse, we welcome a range of articles that reflect the diversity of opinions, theories, and practices.

For example, we seek articles on topics such as:

• Classroom examples of teachers incorporating opportunities for reading and writing with contemporary technologies, e.g., blogs, wikis, podcasts
• Examples of combinations of technology, including more traditional technologies
• Descriptions of technologies that may change the way we conceptualize classrooms, teaching and learning
• Advice for teachers seeking to learn more about technologies
• Caveats for teachers and educators on incorporating technologies
• How assessment systems are emerging or being influenced
• Ideas on preparing new teachers for the technological demands of 21st century classrooms
• Arguments on future directions of technological demands, change, and opportunities
• Issues of access, policy, privacy, etc.

If you have an idea, please drop us a line. For questions, ideas, or comments, please contact

W. Douglas Baker, Co-Editor
Douglas.Baker@emich.edu
734.487.0150
Eastern Michigan University
Dept. of English Language and Literature
612 Pray-Harrold
Ypsilanti, MI 48197

Kia Jane Richmond, Co-Editor
Krichmon@nmu.edu
906.227.2713
Northern Michigan University
Dept. of English
1401 Presque Isle Avenue
Marquette, MI 49855