

The Michigan Council of Teachers of English

Motivating and inspiring Michigan's English Language Arts teachers.

The Michigan English Teacher E-Newsletter

An Email Exclusively for MCTE Members

March 2009

Bright Ideas

Conference

Saturday,
April 4, 2009
Michigan State
University



See related article.
Contact Reade Dornan
dornan@msu.edu
for more information

President's Update

By Mary Anna Kruch, kruchma@aol.com



Keeping the Focus on Improvement

It's sometimes easy to overlook students' continuous progress in the English Language Arts with so much focus on and discussion about how to survive the standardized testing blast. In the midst of high-stakes testing in our state, teachers' methods are constantly being questioned, probed, and amended to what I have often referred to as *MEAP Sweeps*. Students in the middle school in which I taught were provided with juice boxes, granola bars, and uplifting buttons encouraging students to *Make the Grade* were dispersed, almost like a pep rally. Not only has money been involved as an incentive to schools who make adequate yearly progress (AYP), but certain humiliation has also befallen schools who have not, with published test scores (as if these were the only indicators of students' learning), threats of governmental take-over, and a general lack of respect for students' and teachers' efforts on continuous improvement.

We are long overdue for a surge of a more realistic and balanced release of information addressing and educating the public about how students learn and how to look critically at information released from testing organizations that does not actually reflect students' knowledge base and intellectual levels of learning.

Educators need to, as a whole, and in every parent-teacher conference and faculty meeting, remind peers and public that students are social, human, abstract-thinking human beings—and that such processes as reading and writing, which are abstract processes, cannot be solely be determined by concrete measures. Students who can pronounce words do not necessarily understand what they are reading; students who can diagram sentences and circle dependent clauses do not necessarily know how to write. The public and our parents need to become our advocates; they need to learn how to respect and support teachers as the experts in the classroom, who use a multiple of measures, mainly informal, to assess student learning, attempting to build upon students' prior knowledge with lots of practice and application. Will more pre-K-university teachers jump on the bandwagon and speak up? Perhaps they may, if they have tenure and if they can find a few more minutes in the already crowded day.

If you are an NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) member, and if you would like to take part in educating our senators and representatives in Washington about spreading the good word, consider taking part in **NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day** on Thursday, April 23, 2009, in Washington, DC. You may be thinking that this isn't for you, and you can't come to Advocacy Day. Yet, you can make a difference. Last April, our own **Fred Barton**, MCTE Assistant Professor and MCTE President from 2006-2008, attended 2008 Advocacy Day. He says,

"To be successful, advocacy must build from what the two sides have in common rather than center solely on their differences. This is the only way to move from talking at one another to talking to one another." (Used with permission.)

Please check out this link to learn more about this year's Literacy Advocacy Day here: <http://ncte.org/action/advocacyday>

Recently, Past MCTE President **Janet Swenson** asked **Red Cedar Writing Project** list serve members to comment on readers' thinking about the influence of effort on students' ultimate grades, and she attached an article from *The New York Times*, by **Max Roosevelt** called "Students' Expectations Seen as Causing Grade Disputes." Although the article reflected college students' reactions as feelings of entitlement about higher grades because they put a lot of effort into their papers and thought they deserved more, I can remember some middle school students and parents responding similarly, prior to my use of writing workshop and accompanying on-going assessment measures, where students usually always knew where they stood. Although I have taught both graduate and undergraduate university students for several years, I directed my response to the middle school classroom setting. In part, I responded to the discussion this way:

"For middle school students, I believe that improvement in writing occurs over time, in a forward progression, which entails multi-use of formative measures. Writing becomes part of everyday work, with much social interaction, including conferences with the teacher, culminating in students' decisions about which writing pieces to take through to final draft to include in a portfolio. If one is running an active writing workshop such as that described above, you would be familiar not only with students' effort, but also with their strengths on which to build -- and also the areas they need support. So, effort, one way or another, figures into grades."

My view is that formative assessment, such as portfolio grading, teacher conferences, running records or kid watching, are part of a process in which students take part, so that assessment is not something "done" to them.

I like **Kelly Gallagher's** practice of collecting early drafts and choosing two items of concern upon which to comment: one regarding content and one editing. If we wait until the end of the writing process to respond to students, particularly pointing out multiple errors, they will not respond by improving their writing. Gallagher also passes the early drafts back to students, with his responses that something needs fixing, placing the responsibility of correction on writers, who can then elicit help from a peer or group of peers; if after all of this it cannot be determined how to fix an error, the small group brings their writing notebooks to Gallagher, where they take notes as he gives students a related mini-lesson and practice with the area of need. This process shows a LOT of effort! In looking at students' writing, we must view both the process AND the product. (For those interested, check out Chapter 7 of Gallagher's book, called *Teaching Adolescent Writers* (2006), published by Stenhouse.)

With jobs, respect, and students' efforts on the line, I believe we need to be honest and upfront, or transparent, with parents and the general public, that high-stakes tests can no more indicate the whole of a students' learning any more than they can predict success in life.

We all know folks who aced the ACT and dropped out of college, or who were National Merit Scholars, but had no social skills, as are needed in today's job market, so did not, in truth, *make the grade*. We also know far more peers and students who did not (or could not score well on tests until they learned to do so) *make the grade* on standardized tests, only to succeed in life. I am one of those folks---perhaps an over-achiever at times, but more a life-long learner, as are all human beings. Let's keep the focus on both IMPROVEMENT and EFFORT, keep on learning, and speak up to educate those who just don't get it.

Mary Anna

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- Barton, Fred. (2008). <http://ncte.org/action/advocacyday> Urbana, IL: NCTE
Gallagher, Kelly. (2006). *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
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2009 Bright Ideas Conference – MSU Union– April 4, 9-3

The World in a Word

Donna Jo Napoli comes to East Lansing in April

Donna Jo Napoli is the keynote speaker at April's Bright Ideas Conference. Napoli is the prize winning author of absorbing books for Young Adult readers. She is best known for fleshing out ancient tales in unexpected ways. *The Magic Circle* gives us a complex figure of a witch, who is almost sympathetic in a new construction of the Hansel and Gretel tale. *Beast*, the "Beauty and the Beast" story, has the reader thinking about the full lengths of courage and *Zel* ("Rapunzel") wraps around a possessive relationship between mother and daughter. Napoli's Celtic tales fill in the gaps of the stories, bringing vivid and sensual detail to a time beyond contemporary memory. Her characters are often strong-minded females, but a young male like Salz of "Pied Piper of Hamlyn" is also someone real to us and telling. Her love stories keep us wanting more.

For more information about the author, visit <http://www.donnajonapoli.com/>

About the Author- <http://www.donnajonapoli.com/biography.html>

Picture Books and Early Readers <http://www.donnajonapoli.com/picturebooks.html>

Elementary and Middle School Novels <http://www.donnajonapoli.com/elementary.html>

Young Adult Novels <http://www.donnajonapoli.com/ya.html>

Conference Registration for the 2009 Bright Ideas Conference
Register online at <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>

Registration is also available by printing and completing the PDF registration version located just below the link for this newsletter on the new site. Please use a separate form for each person registering. Make your check payable to the English Conference Fund and mail it with your completed registration (postmarked) by March 26, 2009, to:

Bright Ideas Conference
Reade W. Dornan, Chair
201 Morrill Hall, Dept. of English
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1033

Receipt of registration form and payment will be acknowledged by e-mail. Onsite registration opens at 8:30 AM. All onsite registration is \$60. Parking is free in the garage behind Morrill Hall on MSU's campus. A map is available at <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com/>

New on the MCTE Ning

Rob Rozema continues to update and retool our *Ning* and increase our options. He recently sent this message to all members of Michigan Council of Teachers of English:

All,

One great part about the MCTE social network is that it allows all of us to share resources very easily.

*To this end, I have added a new discussion item called **Archive**, which invites you to upload your favorite or most effective lesson plans, units, writing invitations, or other teaching documents.*

My own students will be sharing their unit plans here at the end of the semester. Ideally, the site will become a resource not only for them--beginning teachers--but also for veteran teachers on the lookout for new ideas.

*Looking forward to sharing with you,
Rob*

Visit Michigan Council of Teachers of English at: <http://mienglishteacher.ning.com>

Elementary Focus

By Taryn Sabo, MCTE Elementary Chair, taryn1014@yahoo.com

A Special Second Grader

When beginning the school year a myriad of questions emerge about making the program interesting and beneficial to meet the needs of all the students. In parochial schools teachers may or may not have the benefit of resource teachers for students that need extra help. The questions become more specific when a person knows that a limited budget will not provide the assistants to work with students with special needs meaning these students will be assigned to regular classrooms, and therefore, the questions become more specific. Without training, how does a teacher work with a student with special needs? How can a teacher teach a full class when one of the children needs one-on-one help? What does the teacher of one of these students do when the parents of this special child are looking for normalcy that cannot be provided? All these questions and where is the answer?

This fall a student arrived in my class. The parents were not happy with the previous school where their son attended first grade. Neither the student nor the parents had a productive or happy year. The student has been diagnosed with *Selective Mutism*, a childhood communication disorder that is a symptom of an anxiety disorder requiring treatment in conjunction with mental health professionals. (I reference the article by Robert L. Schum "Selective Mutism an Integrated Treatment Approach".) The student was of the age for second grade but was at the ability of first grade. Upon the parent's request, the student was placed in my second grade classroom.

As a conventional teacher, the condition of *Selective Mutism* was very new to me. I found that this child was very shy and unable to talk or speak at first. Within two weeks, the student was feeling comfortable enough to answer yes or no and to use short sentences. The student was also able to read beginner books to me during D.E.A.R (Drop Everything and Read) time. This, to me was a great step in progress with this student.

During our first quarter of school, this student showed great progress in reading and writing, although it was on the first grade level, and in creating friendships with the other children in the classroom. In this first quarter we discovered that this student had been diagnosed with *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*.

I used sticker cards to help him make good choices within the classroom. This helped with him sitting in his seat and finishing his class work. I adapted his class work so that he was able to accomplish his work in a timely manner and not be left behind. His homework was cut back so that he didn't feel overwhelmed at home. Still there was a definite problem with actions in the classroom.

Working with the parents, it was decided to try medication to help with his behavior problems in the classroom; Ritalin was used in the lowest dosage. This medication addressed the hyperactivity but the happy, comfortable and talking student disappeared. Not a good trade. The student, who is low in reading and comprehension for second grade, functioned at about the beginning first grade level. In the first semester, the reading teacher could communicate with the student and work on his level. Now we are struggling to understand whether he is exhibiting "selective hearing" or perhaps has a hearing problem. We seemed to have made five steps back, farther than where we were in the beginning.

This child needs more help than he is receiving. My private school is able to provide part-time help from an assistant who is a mom with no training but who brings love and patience to the classroom. Do I, as the teacher, spend the time with the student to get him through one subject lesson? Do I have the assistant work with him one-on-one and not help out with the others? Questions keep coming up. This student has begun the second semester in second grade. The lessons and instructions become more independent and more complex. My student is falling behind and I am accommodating more and more with his class work and homework. There has been a meeting with his parents stating that if this child returns next year he will repeat the second grade. He is not ready for the third grade and the work that is required.

Recently my student has been taken off the Ritalin and is seeing a psychiatrist that is monitoring and may suggest a different type and amount of medication, or perhaps no medication at all. The parents, doctor, and I are all working to the best of our abilities to help this child. At this point, my student does not do homework except to finish class work that needs to be completed. He has started to finish a repeating sentence for me at DEAR time in a beginner book. His mother is tutoring him in reading using the *FastTrack* reading program. He stays at home for the first hour of class and comes to school an hour later.

Although repeating a year for a second grader may bring problems, it will provide opportunities for higher achievement. Another year, however, means more questions and more answers – a stimulus for research and for teachers to learn from their students.

MCTE elementary teachers who have seen the needs of many children, what helpful suggestions can you offer me as well as other teachers? Are there suggestions of alternative teaching techniques for students like mine that can be used? Are there alternative teaching facilities that work with a student like mine? All suggestions are appreciated and welcome.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Retrieved on February 21, 2009 at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder/complete-index.shtml>

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Schum, Robert L. (2009). "Selective Mutism: An Integrated Approach." *The ASHA Leader Online*. Retrieved on February 20, 2009 at <http://www.asha.org/about/publications/leaderonline/archives/2002/13/020924ftr.htm>.

Toby's Teaching Tip

By Toby Kahn-Loftus, Region 10 Coordinator and President-Elect
tobykahnloftus@gmail.com

Jumping into Flexible Groups for Differentiated Instruction

We've all seen the powerful research about the need to have students working in small, differentiated groups to improve student achievement. It always looks great when the experts explain it, but it can be intimidating for teachers to figure out. In collaboration with one of my colleagues at Evert High School, **Tonya Erickson**, we came up with a way to "have a go" with differentiation that's not too daunting. We took language from the **Spencer Kagan** Cooperative Learning Models http://www.kaganonline.com/google/cooperative_learning/, combined with discussions with **Patricia Benson** (a certified Kagan trainer), and the director of the Center for Excellence at CMU

<http://www.centerforexcellence.cmich.edu/>, and integrated them with the

powerful ideas in **Pat Williams Boyd's** resource book, *Challenging All Kids in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*.

<http://www.emu-aaup.org/files/Pat%20WilliamsBoyd%20Statement%20to%20the%20BOR.pdf> Tonya and I came up with the following, format that helps establish the classroom community, gives kids choices, and creates a simple way for the teacher to differentiate for readiness.



Home Team



The **Home Team** is a self-selected group based on students' social interests and comfort zones. One way to create home team groups of 3 to 4 students, and assure that everyone is included is to have students submit a friendly letter to the teacher listing 3 or 4 students that they would like to work with. You can guarantee most students 2 of their 4 requested partners. If group challenges remain, private conversations with some of the confident students can resolve most problems. When you do this on the first day or two of class it's also a great way to have an instant informal assessment of student writing in the class.

Practice Team



The **Practice Team** is a readiness group of 3 to 4 students who are placed with students of similar skills and abilities. The teacher with selected assessment data determines readiness placement on the practice team: reading level, writing sample, mathematical level, etc. These groups are teacher selected and can change with additional data from on-going assessments and "kid-watching" observations.



Away Team

The **Away Team** is a mixed readiness (heterogeneous) group of 4 or 5 students organized by the teacher. It includes students from different ability groups (high, average, low) and / or different intelligences (i.e. visual, logical, verbal, etc...). The teacher should consider gender, social skills, frequent absentees, as well as academic strengths for this group. Many teachers begin the year with an index card for every student and make notes on the kids for the first few weeks of school (Aaron works hard, Jeff is absent once a week, Angie is a struggling reader, Suzanne is very artistic, John is a musician...).

Professional Development – Region 5

Branch, Calhoun, Eaton, Hillsdale, Ingham, Jackson, Lenawee Counties

By Reade Dornan, Region 5 Coordinator, dornan@msu.edu

Ingham Intermediate School District Partners With MCTE

On February 12, 2009, **Amy Kilbridge** of **Ingham ISD** joined **Reade Dornan** of Michigan Council of Teachers of English to offer a workshop on the uses of Young Adult literature in secondary schools. Participants came from **Holt Public Schools, Waverly Schools, Williamston** and **Mason Public Schools**, and **Okemos High School**. It turned out to be opportune for pooling ideas on using Young Adult literature in the classroom and generating a list of Young Adult novels that "go down well." While enjoying pizza, participants discussed some of the problems of finding the kinds of books that promote reading in middle schools and high school. Teachers concurred that they had a wide range of reading choices and sufficient latitude for choosing appealing books for their classes. After swapping ideas for adding Young Adult literature to the curriculum, participants carried home a suggestion from **ReadWriteThink**—NCTE's website of resources—for teaching an Updike poem, an article on the controversy over award-winning books, and web addresses for book reviews of the latest books.

Michigan's Writing Projects- There's One Close to You!

The **National Writing Project of Michigan** is a state network that provides expertise and professional development in writing for K-College as an affiliate of the **National Writing Project** <http://www.nwp.org/>
Check out the professional development at these Michigan-based sites:

- **Chippewa River Writing Project** at Central Michigan University <http://chippewariverwp.org/>
- **Crossroads Writing Project** at Ferris State University <http://www.ferris.edu/cwp/>
- **Eastern Michigan Writing Project** at Eastern Michigan University <http://www.emichwp.org/>
- **Lake Michigan Writing Project** at Grand Valley State University <http://lmwritingproject.org/>
- **Meadowbrook Writing Project** at Oakland University <http://www4.oakland.edu/?id=5&sid=7>
- **Oakland Writing Project** at the University of Michigan <http://www.owp.soe.umich.edu/>
- **Red Cedar Writing Project** at Michigan State University <http://rcwp.wikispaces.com/>
- **Saginaw Bay Writing Project** at Saginaw Valley State University <http://www.svsu.edu/writingprogram/saginaw-bay-writing-project.html>
- **Third Coast Writing Project** at Western Michigan University <http://www.wmich.edu/thirdcoastwp/>
- **Upper Peninsula Writing Project** at Northern Michigan University <http://www.upwp.net/>
- **Wayne State Writing Project** at Wayne State University <http://ted.coe.wayne.edu:16080/writingproject/>

National Poetry Month-April 2009

It's not too early to begin planning for April's celebration of poetry. To get a head start, visit <http://www.ncte.org/wlu/resources>

NCTE resources include:

- Experimenting with Poetry Writing
- March Madness Poetry Tournament
- Planning for *Poem in your Pocket Day*
- Lesson Plans and more <http://www.ncte.org/poetry>

MCTE Executive Council

President	Mary Anna Kruch	mask92369@gmail.com
President-Elect	Toby Kahn-Loftus	tobykahnloftus@gmail.com
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College Co-Chair	Samantha Caughlan	caughlan@msu.edu
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LAJM Co-Editor	W. Douglas Baker	wbakerii@emu.edu
MET Co-Editor	Rita Maddox	wjmaddox1@comcast.net
MET Co-Editor	Geneva Scully	gscully26@gmail.com
Region 1 Coordinator	Mary C. Cox	cissycox@aol.com
Region 2 Coordinator	Deonna Montei	dmontei@litconsultingllc.com
Region 5 Coordinator	Reade Dornan	dornan@msu.edu
Region 6 Coordinator	Jodi Carlson	Carlson@pw.k12.mi.us
Region 7 Coordinator	Toby Kahn-Loftus	tobykahnloftus@gmail.com
Region 8 Coordinator	Jennifer Swisher	Jenswish@remc11.K12.mi.us
Region 9 Coordinator	Rita Maddox	wjmaddox1@comcast.net
Region 10 Coordinator	Kent Case	kcase@concordpetoskey.com
Region 11 Coordinator	Tom Hyslop	thyslop@nmu.edu
Region 11 Co-Coordinator	Kia-Jane Richmond	krichmon@nmu.edu
Membership	Fred Barton	bartonf@msu.ed
	Ray Lawson	Rlawson48309@yahoo.com
SLATE	Ellen Brinkley	Ellen.brinkley@wmich.edu
NCTE Liaison	Kia-Jane Richmond	krichmon@nmu.edu
Student Affiliate	Kathy Morcom	morcomka@msu.edu
MDE Liaison	Lynnette VanDyke	vandykel@michigan.gov

The Michigan English Teacher E-Newsletter is published monthly and accepts short articles, reviews and opinion pieces on matters of importance to teachers of English Language Arts K-12. Specific questions about content, length and style should be directed to the editors: Rita Maddox, Co-Editor wjmaddox1@comcast.net
Geneva Scully, Co-Editor gscully26@gmail.com