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Robert Rozema

Jonathan Bush

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Opening Words:

Ethos, Teaching, and Best Practice

Robert Rozema
Jonathan Bush
Co-Editors

Among many other achievements, the Greek rhetorician and scholar Aristotle gave the world a powerful term: ethos. Defined generally, ethos can be equated with credibility. Inherent in the term, though, are concepts that go beyond simple credibility—including trust, belief, and most importantly, character and reputation. Among the rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—ethos was the most important to attain, and the most difficult to achieve. One doesn't achieve ethos via practice and revision. It comes from character, knowledge, and past and present accomplishments.

Teachers, of course, take pains to establish ethos every day. But how do we achieve ethos in an era when the idea of education is under such intense and often negative scrutiny? When prescribed curricula and standardized testing often trump our best intuitions? This issue of *LAJM* suggests an answer. We maintain ethos by understanding not only how to teach well, but by knowing why we teach the ways we do, and by sharing those reasons with those around us. In short, we follow best practice principles.

In *Best Practice: Today's Standards for Teaching in America's Schools* (2005), Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde define best practice and the ethos it imparts for teachers, calling it "a shorthand emblem of serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching." (vi). To that, we would add that best practices are always local, stemming from our awareness of our own classrooms. This is, in part, why we find best practice so useful. Unlike the standards movement that defines "good" teaching through arbitrary achievement tests and prescribed

teaching methods, the concept of best practice finds its roots in the professional knowledge of teachers—and the ability of those teachers to translate that professional knowledge into positive and productive classrooms.

In this issue of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, we called for teachers to share their best practices with us, specifically discussing their concepts of "thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art" teaching. The articles this issue run the gamut from literary studies, to writing in professional and academic genres, to work with dialects, grammar, and technology. What ties these articles together is the belief in the power of teachers and the ethos that can develop through principled practice and knowledge of state-of-the-art teaching.

Suzan Aiken begins the issue by describing a highly original writing assignment through which her students "raised their own standards for effective writing, listening, and speaking." In "Trading Spaces with Tom Walker: Moving the Devil Out of Fourth Hour," Brian White and Jennifer Haberling offer a compelling example of best practice in literature instruction. Of equal importance for our discussion is the way White, a university professor, and Haberling, a high school teacher, collaborated across institutional borders. Jackie Folkert provides another example of border-crossing by describing the uses of journalistic writing as a means of learning. As Folkert states, "When students write journalistically, they use higher-order thinking to learn as they demand accuracy, pinpoint relevancy, consider audience, and synthesize information."

Andrea Burke illustrates best practice in another area: professional development. Recently certified by the NBPTS board, Burke describes how certification changed her career and her teaching. In a related article, Susan Griffith and Jennifer Jones define best practices in new teacher development via their "best next-step practice model." *LAJM* guest co-editor and technology advocate Robert Rozema brings the issue into the technological realm by aligning best practice writing principles with the blogging phenomenon.

In “My First Look at Publishing,” Lynn Baker focuses on publication, demonstrating that that concepts of best practice are built not just on theory, but on experience as well. Katherine Ha uses her experiences with non-traditional students to show us a poignant example of ways to reach students labeled by some as unreachable. Ha, like Baker, draws on her experiences to craft practices that meet the unique needs of her students.

Meghan Monroe argues that young adult literature can develop writing skills in a college classroom. Kari Scheidel follows with a discussion of poetry best practices for writing, reading, and thinking. Jen Clyde then teaches us her concepts of dialect and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and displays ways to bring bidialectalism into a classroom in positive and productive ways. The issue finishes with a piece by Barbara Schneider and Erin Fletcher that weaves writing ‘best practice’ with mathematics.

Taken as a whole, this issue shows a set of teachers and scholars who are seeking their own conceptions of state-of-the-art teaching. Their ethos is based on experience, knowledge, and professionalism. From them, we learn not only about teaching, but about professional development and the importance of teacher-created knowledge.

We will continue this theme in our next issue, “Teacher Advocacy and Teacher Research” (Spring/Summer 2006) Guest co-editor Doug Baker will be asking English language arts teachers to describe their own advocacy efforts and teacher-research projects that develop ethos within their local communities and beyond.

Our Fall/Winter 2006 *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* issue is a very special one. Elizabeth Brockman, John Dinan, Laura Renzi, and Susan Steffel, all from Central Michigan University, and all active contributors to the growth and development of LAJM, are guest-editing a commemorative “Two Decades of LAJM.” We are excited to work with this group of distinguished scholars and writers. This issue includes reprints of the ‘best of’ articles from each editorial era, commentaries from past and present editors and

MCTE leaders, and reflections on the importance of *LAJM* in the development of English teaching in Michigan since its inception twenty years ago.