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Opening Words: Making Writing Matter

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Guest Co-Editor

Writing, like any art form, is a process that requires risk-taking and commitment and feelings of safety. Writing, like any communicative act, requires conformity and originality, empathy and analysis, connection and detachment. Writing, like a relationship, is imbued with feelings that are connected to the act of being in the act itself. Writing matters.

This issue of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* is dedicated to that proposition: that writing is essential to teaching and learning in the English Language Arts (and in other subjects as well). Writing matters for a variety of reasons, some of which are highlighted in this volume. Writing has importance in our lives as teachers – we write to remember, to analyze, to vent, and to record. Writing matters to students – they write to think, to feel, to connect, to argue. Writing can help those who are learning a new language, practicing the use of a familiar language, or engaging in reflection. Examining best practices and theories used in the teaching of writing can help those who are entering the field, and those who are already in it, to be flexible, to develop classroom strategies, and to know themselves and their students better. Writing matters.

Overview

The first essay in this issue, written by Leah Vetne, combines both narration and the examination of our selves as writers and teachers of writing. Readers are invited to travel along with Vetne in “The Text of Life,” which begins with the story of the author’s grandfather telling her stories (reading memories), then moves to her own story of a willow tree (reading the landscape) and habits of letter-writing and scrapbooking. Vetne invites us consider our life

experiences as texts and invites us (and our students) to read (write) our own lives.

Some of the other essays in this issue focus on stories of classrooms and how writing is being taught at the elementary, secondary, or college level. For example, Elizabeth Brockman’s “Writing for a Better World: Three Snapshots of Adolescents at Work” shows us how students who are aware of their “writing territories” can develop more acute awareness of the concept of audience and also make an impact on the real world through writing. Joyce Benvenuto, in “Audience is Everything,” shares with us the power of listening and silence in the writing classroom. She describes several activities from her own creative writing classes that have helped students to become more proficient at both writing and reading poetry.

Two authors in this volume focus our attention to how writing can be used in the teaching of languages other than English. In Abby Brown’s “Discovering the Creative Side of Writing in the Spanish Classroom,” the author demonstrates how writing creative projects such as poetry, journals (“diarios”), and recipes can give students more confidence and control over their fluency in Spanish as well as give them a way to be creative in two languages! Tracy Pollard, in “Writing is Writing: Applying Best Practice to Writing in a Language Other than English,” discusses her use of best practice (which she defines in the essay) in the teaching of Japanese in a suburban Michigan high school. Pollard points out that today’s foreign language classroom is about communication and real life applications of the language being learned (a point with which Brown agrees), and offers up examples of writing projects that help students to become more fluent in Japanese (i.e., authoring children’s books). Pollard and Brown point out the benefits of viewing writing as a process, but Pollard also indicates that students can have problems with peer response in the second language. I believe that further study on this issue would be productive to teachers of writing in general.

Two of the essays deal with college writing concerns specifically. Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant (“Bridging the Chasm between Philosophies”) focuses her essay on issues related to the teaching of writing at

the college level. Using information from a two seminars she attended in one week (one a lecture on brain studies and the other on grade inflation), Belant argues asks several relevant questions: Who is responsible for student learning? How can teachers evaluate fairly and usefully? Do we serve the students, the institution, the society, or the subject matter? Likewise, M. Kilian McCurrie's article (entitled "Creating Effective Peer Response"), highlights the college writing classroom, examining potential benefits and/or problems of using orally-based versus textually-based peer response strategies. McCurrie examines oral communication theory, constructivist theory, and even close reading in his investigation of various peer response techniques, and comes to the conclusion that flexibility and a reflective practice informed by composition theory are excellent components of a writing teacher's repertoire.

Other essays in this issue draw attention to a specific type of writing: journaling. Heather Solgot, for instance, in "Journaling for Personal and Professional Growth," describes how journaling during student teaching helped her to reflect on her teaching strategies and students' progress. Additionally, Solgot argues that journaling can help student teachers to release feelings in a safe way, to connect the teaching self to the personal self, and even to view writing as a pleasurable act. Amber Kinonen's essay entitled "Journaling and Positive Reinforcement" also focuses on journaling and how giving students positive feedback regardless of the quality of the work to help students develop confidence in themselves as writers. What makes this essay poignant is that Kinonen's own experiences with negative responses/critique from teachers have helped her to see the power of teacher-words.

Several essays are focused on the intricacies of writing itself. Robin Watson's "Colons and Hyphens and Commas, Oh My!" introduces us to the idea of recreational grammar and compares and contrasts various grammar texts for their educational and entertainment value, including the newly popular *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss. In "Ignorance was Bliss: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation," Jan Miller edits the round-table discussion of a group of students in Western Michigan University's English

Ed program. These writers (Cameron, Gottschalk, Stone, and Yard) each take on a different aspect of the book's usefulness in the real world of teaching English. As Miller says, "The contributors ... all agree that *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* has a place on educators' reference shelves...[but also agree] that Lynne Truss has taken her crusade too far" (14). The same could be said of some teachers of English who confuse writing with penmanship, says Elizabeth Kerlikowske, author of "Bailing the Pen-Man's Ship." Kerlikowske looks at memories of her own son's experiences learning as a left-handed writer and offers the idea that keyboarding can change our minds about the importance of handwriting.

Bridgette Buehrly's essay "All Students Can Write!" draws our attention to possible instructional strategies to be used when teaching writing to students who have autism. The integration of drawing and writing, also mentioned in Kinonen's article, is but one of the instructional techniques Buehrly points out as useful to students who are learning to write. She also emphasizes the need for flexibility on the part of the writing teacher, something that can be applied whether we are teaching students with special needs or not.

Conclusion

I am excited to go back into the classroom after reading this journal. I have some strategies to try, a few stories to share, and a better understanding of how much writing matters to all of us. Whether teaching the English Language Arts or another subject such as Spanish or Japanese; whether working with students with special needs or those struggling with penmanship; whether laboring in an elementary, secondary, or college setting, one thing is clear: We should, each of us, take some time to write, to examine, and to punctuate our lives. We ought to allow writing to have a bearing on our teaching and our learning, starting today.