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**OPENING WORDS:
THE MEANING OF RELEVANCE**

**ALLEN WEBB AND JONATHAN BUSH
EDITORS**

Relevance is a term that we associate with the 1960s. Cool, man. Fight the power! Down with the establishment! What we want has to be *relevant*.

Yet, relevance is certainly more than just a popular slogan. Indeed, good teaching has always been about relevance. Constructivist and reader response theory argue that students acquire new information as it is meaningful to their world, relevant to what they previously know and their role in the learning process. Critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, and cultural studies, our new guiding principles, ask students to reach beyond themselves, to find out about the lives of others, to become politically and culturally engaged.

Of course, now we are in the era of standards-based education, benchmarks, hours of fill-in-the-bubble-sheet testing. I sometimes wonder, has the word “aligned” replaced “relevant” as our educational beacon?

The collection of essays in this issue of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* make a convincing case that “relevance” is still a vital criteria. Interestingly, while some advocate dramatic innovation and learning outside the classroom walls, other teachers consider “relevance” within the context of the canon, traditional approaches, even standards-based learning.

The first essay “Academic Service Learning in an English Methods Class: A Practical Approach” by Kia Richmond describes how she works with aspiring English teachers who have a natural “interest in connecting their students’ writing to the ‘real world’.” Yet integrating academic goals with service in the community is new to her students who have never “been asked to write a lesson plan including academic service learning before.” Richmond finds that highly relevant service learning

projects are a good match with “The English Language Arts Content Standards and Benchmarks” in the *Michigan Curriculum Framework*.”

At Allegan High School Jennifer Conrad wants to be “Making Research Real” and she does it through “The Multi-Genre Research Project.” These multigenre papers take students “beyond the comfortable realm of voiceless, formulaic writing” and ask “them to put themselves on the line” as they develop a wide variety of creative pieces addressing author’s lives that are carefully thematically linked. In Conrad’s educational world the emphasis is on “best practices” where students connect, draw, weigh, and manipulate information — the relevance comes from their intense and creative engagement in the process.

Elizabeth Blackburn-Brockman makes a case that some professional articles for written for a teacher audience can actually be important reading for secondary students. “A Relevant Reading Assignment from a Surprising Source” describes self-reflection about writing assignment, grading standards, and research design when high school students study an *English Journal* article about research on the high school writing experiences of entering college freshman.

Jennifer Berne focuses on thematic learning as the key to relevance. “Questions and Answers: The Issues of Relevance in Literacy Instruction” argues that the key to good instruction are challenging, authentic themes that raise questions teachers themselves are seeking to answer. This approach changes the role of teacher and student and makes the learning seem more valuable and purposeful.

In “Writing to Change the World: Creating Critical and Relevant Texts in Secondary English Classrooms” Ernest Morrell describes a summer research seminar he conducts for high school students in Los Angeles. Working in groups his students develop critical research projects relevant to student’s lives and social justice. His students writing “has led to state legislation, community activism, and major policy changes” in schools.

As we see in our *Forum: Relevance in Teaching Literature*, the term ‘relevance’ can have multiple definitions. In “Making Meaningful Connections: The Role of Multicultural Literature in the Lived Experiences of Students” Gina Louise Deblase observes a multiethnic eighth grade classroom and listens carefully to teacher and students. Recognizing that “multicultural literature has the potential to help connect the world of the classroom with the lives of our students outside of the classroom” she is carefully attentive to the way that classroom interaction and discussion either silences students or allows them to “bring their own understandings into the exploration of meaning.”

Taking a strikingly different view Mary Kay Costa-Valentine in “Teaching Literature for Relevance” writes passionately about how an historical emphasis in teaching classic works of British literature, such as the Anglo-Saxon epics, Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantics can help young people learn about themselves. These two essays strike a fascinating point / counterpoint in the debate over what makes literature relevant.

Elaine J. O’Quinn is a literature professor and former public school teacher on a mission: get teachers to see that young adult literature is relevant to young people and germane to the classroom. In “But What About Shakespeare? The Struggle of Young Adult Literature to Survive” O’Quinn argues that literature professors need to embrace YA literature. Indeed, she believes that if we hope to turn adolescents on to reading, YA literature needs to replace the canon of more difficult texts.

In “Books that Make a Difference: Finding the Relevant and Critical Texts for Today’s Classrooms” Toby Kahn-Loftus provides an annotated list of “powerful, critical, and engaging texts” for the middle school classroom. Works on his list address issues such as social justice, race and gender discrimination, and access in a democratic society.

Josh Luukkonen, an aspiring teacher at Central Michigan University wants teachers to break down the boundaries between school and “real life.” “Relevancy in the Classroom” is a passionate

argument for drawing on the popular culture that students live in and care about and tying that into the curriculum. Luukkones argues you can do this whether you are teaching contemporary works or the canon.

In this issue the “Resources for Teachers” column is of course about “Relevance – What matters today? What matters tomorrow? Julie King annotates for us a variety of professional books, magazines, organizations and web sites that breath life and personal experience into reading and writing in middle and secondary grades.

The issue ends with “Composition Goulash”, a short piece from Western Michigan University undergraduate Joe Frankfurth.

From instructional strategies that bring real world issues into the classroom or take students into the community to strategies to develop an intense and personal involvement with the curriculum, be it emerging new works or the canon itself, our contributors describe vital and engaging classrooms and texts that will energize language arts teaching and learning.

Finally, as we complete our first issue as editors of *LAJM*, we must thank our predecessors, Sue Steffel and Jill VanAntwerp, as well as the editors who preceded them, for their efforts to make *LAJM* relevant and meaningful to the teachers of Michigan. We look forward to continuing this tradition in our next issues, focusing on “Celebrating Teaching in Michigan” (Fall/Winter 2003) and “Professional Development (Spring/Summer 2004).