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Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1985-1990

John Dinan
Guest Editor

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 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.

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-obsessed 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. . .