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Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1990-1994

Susan Steffel
Guest Editor

Assigned years other than those for which I was co-editor, I enjoyed going back through my 1990-94 issues, re-reading them often from cover to cover. As is often the case, I found myself talking back to the journals. "Oh, yes," I'd say. "I remember this one." And I remembered how they spoke to me at the time. However, in re-reading them, I find that the articles continue to speak to me after more than a decade. In going back through my old issues of *LAJM*, I was struck with how much in the profession has remained the same, rather than how much has changed. Narrowing down my selection to just three articles was incredibly difficult—I think I began with more than fifteen.

I tried to use a number of categories to narrow my selection: authors, themes, topics, but none of them seemed to help me. My theory that there would be definite trends over the years didn't seem to hold. Instead, I found that there were recurring themes and topics that spoke to the very core of the profession: the necessity of individualized instruction and assessment, professional activism, and continued teacher engagement. Finally, although I was so attached to them all, I was able to whittle my list down to these three: Mary Dekker's "Learning to Value Learning: What Our Students Teach Us" (8.2 [Fall 1992]: 10-18), Ellen Brinkley's "Responding to Michigan's Legislative Mandates" (9.2 [Fall 1993]: 31-34), and Jennifer Ochoa's "On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher" (10.2 [Fall 1994]: 53-57).

Learning to Value Learning: What Our Students Teach Us

Mary Dekker

"Learning to Value Learning: What Our Students Teach Us," by Mary Dekker-Shelton, is one of many articles that she has contributed over the years. Dekker served as Region V coordinator for MCTE and later as a co-editor of *LAJM*. Currently teaching at Grand Valley State University,

Mary was a second-grade classroom teacher at Morrice Elementary with sixteen years of experience when she wrote "Learning to Value Learning." In this article, she talks about applying whole language in the classroom and using multiple forms of assessment to find out what our students DO know, instead of what they DON'T know. In this yearlong study, Dekker practices what Yetta Goodman calls "kidwatching" and shares with us what she observes, what she hears, and what she celebrates in her own classroom.

She describes how she uses multiple forms of assessment with a particularly challenging student who wasn't engaged and appeared to have difficulty with reading and oral language. In another classroom, this young girl may have been written off, but Dekker persists in her encouragement of

this student. Over the course of the year, she is able to see, appreciate, and document the huge gains this student makes. She demonstrates that all students—even those who come in to our classrooms with labels—can learn if provided with the right opportunities. One size does not fit all for teaching, and we must be willing to allow our students to

show us what they know in their terms and listen carefully enough to hear them when they tell us what they need [from us] in order to learn.

Responding to Michigan's Legislative Mandates

Ellen Brinkley

"Responding to Michigan's Legislative Mandates," was written by Ellen Brinkley, who is currently a professor at Western Michigan University, Director of the Third Coast Writing Project, and past president of MCTE. Brinkley's article chronicles the initial involvement in 1991 of MCTE with the Michigan legislature over the then-new mandate for teacher competency testing. So many times, it seems that these laws, tests, and mandates appear out of nowhere—imposed upon us without any input, and often, that assumption is initially correct. However, Brinkley catalogues for us the important role that MCTE, professional organizations, and individuals play in the implementation of them.

After receiving a mailing from the testing company with the initial teacher competency objectives, Brinkley quickly noticed that the objectives were clearly out of date and not representative of the research or teaching approaches that were currently in use. Upset by this apparent step

backward, MCTE leaders quickly came together in an effort to mitigate this latest legislation in time for the MCTE general membership to take action at the annual fall conference then underway in Lansing. What started in the early fall continued throughout that year and into the spring. Members of MCTE contacted and testified to the various parties involved, including the testing company, the Michigan Department of Education, the legislative committees, joint committees, and the governor. From the Teacher Competency Test to the High School Proficiency Test to the Writing Framework, MCTE has played a role in advising, revising the process, and being professionally proactive in the issues that impact our classrooms. We don't always end up with the results we want, but we know that we must be at the table to have any input at all.

On Reading and Writing and Becoming a Teacher

Jennifer Ochoa

Written when she was still a college senior looking forward to her first teaching job, Jennifer Ochoa shares her reading/writing history as a confessed bookaholic who decided to become a teacher because it allowed her to do something that she loved. Throughout this article, she weaves together her own childhood experiences with those that she hopes to create in her classroom, always including the elements of engagement, passion, and fun. She stresses the importance of modeling for students the real value of reading and writing—the personal value, not just the educational or economic ones.

Ochoa argues that once students are able to see their teachers reading and writing for more than just school purposes, they will be more tempted to participate themselves and to see these activities as both meaningful and beneficial. The hope and the energy of this new teacher's engagement—with the subject matter, the classroom, and the profession—remind us all of why we went into teaching and what we want for our classrooms. It is this continued optimism of new teachers entering the profession that gives us all hope for the future.