Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 22
Issue 2 *Celebrating Two Decades of the
Language Arts Journal of Michigan*

Article 11

2006

Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1995-1999

Elizabeth Brockman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Brockman, Elizabeth (2006) "*Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1995-1999*," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1160>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1995-1999

Elizabeth Brockman
Guest Editor

In 1996, I resigned from a high school position in Ohio to become an English professor at Central Michigan University. Having spent over ten years in the classroom (including the ENG 101 classroom, as a GA at Ohio State), the new teaching role wasn't entirely foreign; even so, CMU was new territory, and *LAJM* eased the transition. In particular, I recall assigning *LAJM* articles to composition methods students and recruiting graduate students to submit articles (two practices I continue). In addition, *LAJM* immediately became a productive venue for my own scholarship. In short, *LAJM* has played a crucial role in my professional life from the "get-go" at CMU.

Selecting three articles from 1995-99 (my "get-go" years at CMU) was a pleasure. I began with Marcy Taylor's "Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle (5.2 [Fall 1999]: 72-76) because its premise is so insightful. Working in reverse chronological order, I then selected Diana Mitchell's "50+ Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom (14.1 [Spring 1998]: 60-65) because it represents a helpful type of *LAJM* article in the 90s. Last, I wanted to showcase the work of Gregory Shafer, so I selected "On the Importance of Writing with Students" (12.2 [Fall 1996]: 26-29). Shafer has consistently published many wonderful teaching narratives, which arguably represent some of the best articles *LAJM* has to offer.

Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle

Marcy Taylor

One of many "professional book reviews" routinely published in *LAJM*, Marcy Taylor's "Teaching with a Capital T: Rethinking Writing Workshop in the Middle" is a review essay of Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*, 2nd edition (1998). Her primary purpose, then, is to introduce and analyze this text, and she does provide substantive and detailed overviews of the major sections and appendices; however, it's Taylor's approach and claims that make the review essay so interesting. In particular, Taylor contextualizes the 2nd

edition of *In the Middle* within the first edition, proposing that Atwell's shift to "teach with a capital T" and balance writing workshop pedagogy reflects a similar shift in the field of composition.

Taylor begins with the personal, acknowledging she started her career as an 8th grade English teacher in 1987 (the publishing date for the first edition of *In the Middle*), and then continuing until her present-day composition/English education position at CMU. During this ten-year span, Taylor (and then Taylor and her students) read *In the Middle* and learned the "promise of process" didn't always live up to the realities of the real-life students, classrooms, and teachers.

. . . I needed a writing pedagogy that acknowledged that even if a teacher creates an environment of student-centered choice and collaboration, student may choose not to engage. I needed a pedagogy that recognized the very real constraints teachers struggle with . . . that must be balanced with their desire to

widen the possibilities for reading and writing in school. I needed a pedagogy that fit with my philosophy of teacher education—that teachers need to be reflective

practitioners who are informed, authoritative, and playful. Frankly, Atwell's *In the Middle* wasn't working. (72)

Just when Taylor was about to dismiss *In the Middle* as "a relic of the past" (72), Atwell published her second edition. According to Taylor, the most important change in the new edition is the English teacher's role. Whereas Atwell originally advocates for a hands-off approach (granting students complete choice in writing workshops), she currently proposes "teaching with a capital T" by intervening in students' writing processes. This intervention includes, for example, creating curricula, making assignments, requiring genres, establishing workshop procedures, providing specific revision suggestions, and conducting evaluations—in short, a major pedagogical shift for Atwell, but one Taylor claims (citing Tobin and Lensmire) is typical of current composition scholarship and pedagogy. Despite the shift, one crucial similarity between the two editions remains: Atwell claims that writing teachers must be writers. However, teachers are encouraged in solely the second edition to own their writerly expertise/ authority and share it with students by demonstration or direct teaching.

Marcy Taylor's review might dismay "early process purists," especially those with limited 6-12 classroom experience; however, current teachers will appreciate Taylor's substantive overview of *In the Middle* and her provocative claims regarding Atwell's pedagogical shift.

50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom

Diana Mitchell

As its title implies, Diana Mitchell's "50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom" is a compilation of fifty mini-reviews of YA novels, in this case published from 1993-98. Each review begins with the author, book title, publishing house/date, and page number, continues with the heart of the review—a one-paragraph overview—and ends with codes identifying appropriate grade level and classroom use. Here is a good example:

Hobbs, Will. *Far North*. Avon Books, 1996. 216 pages. *Gabe moves to the Northwest Territory to go to school so he can be close to his dad. One weekend, he has the opportunity to fly over the area to take in its beauty. He's surprised to see that the other two passengers are Raymond, his roommate from school, who has decided to give school up and return home and an old man from Raymond's village. The pilot sets the plane down so they can have a closer look at the spectacular, thundering falls, and then the engine won't start. The pilot is swept away down the river, and Raymond, Gabe, and the old man begin their desperate struggle to survive the harsh Northwest winter. Action-packed, adventurous, and involving. 8-12 s/i. (62)*

Mitchell arranges the reviews alphabetically by author's last name, and the novels collectively represent a range of characters, conflicts, and settings. As the overview of *Far North* suggests, the reviews feature enticing, but primarily objective, descriptions of each book's major conflict; however, Mitchell—an "MCTE Brick House" and lover of YA novels—understandably slips into book-talk mode from time to time.

I thought [Chicago Blues] rang true. The children of alcoholics are shown in realistic ways, not being able to trust what the mother promises but wanting to believe her desperately. Also, the roles the sisters take is consistent with what I know of alcoholic children. (60-61)

In other reviews, Mitchell shares similar reflections:

"Complex, compelling, I found [Mr. Was] impossible to put down" (62). "I loved all that I learned in [The Second Bend

in the River] about Techumsah and about the lives of settlers" (64). "I loved [Belle Pater's Boy]" (65).

One of several mini-review compilations by Diana Mitchell during the 90's, "50+ Recent Young Adult Novels That Can Work in the Classroom" is a goldmine. After all, what teacher has time to read fifty new YA novels every few years? For such sustained professional activity, there aren't enough minutes during lunch, hours over a weekend, or days in summer—not even for the most enthusiastic teacher. Enter Mitchell. Her reviews help teachers survey a broad range of YA novels in the time it takes to enjoy a mug of coffee or a cup of tea. That's good news for teachers—and students!

On the Importance of Writing with Students

Gregory Shafer

Gregory Shafer's "On the Importance of Writing with Students" tells a good story. In it, he confesses he knows teachers should write with their students, but time is tight (as all LAJM readers know), so Shafer seldom does—until he assigns a spooky story, which his 11th graders encourage him to write too. He good naturedly agrees but, by participating in the responding, drafting and revising activities, does far more than generate a ghost story; he forges new and more democratic relationships with students and, in turn, becomes more sensitive to their needs as writers.

"On the Importance of Writing with Students" is an excellent read, and it's typical of several LAJM articles Shafer has written. By perusing one of his articles, LAJM readers have a window into a specific classroom on a specific day (or series of days,) and they witness Shafer teaching: explaining an assignment, participating in peer reviews, or conversing with students. Though not developed like storybook characters, these students are referred to by first names, and Shafer constructs their comments as quotes, enhancing the "window into the classroom" sensation. Further, Shafer's narratives always have a clear beginning, middle, and ending, and self-explanatory section headings helpfully divide the text into manageable portions. Last, Shafer contextualizes his narratives within scholarship by making connections with the work of (among others) Paulo Freire, Don Murray, and Ira Shor.

LAJM readers will see the value in Gregory Shafer's "On the Importance of Writing with Students" because its message rings true: We should write with our students. Equally important, though, the article portrays a single teacher in the act of teaching writing in an attempt to improve his craft and his students' literacy development. What more could one ask of an LAJM article?