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Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 1999-2004

Laura Renzi-Keener
Guest Editor

As the newest member of our guest editing team to join MCTE, the task of selecting three articles from 1999-2004 was particularly enjoyable. It provided me—during my first year of teaching in Michigan—with the opportunity to take time and look through past issues of *LAJM*. Not being familiar with Michigan or its schools, *LAJM* has given me a window into education in Michigan. From university classrooms, to policy, to high school and middle school teachers and classrooms, *LAJM* has been an invaluable resource for me in thinking about how my own experiences compare with the educators in Michigan.

Brian White's "A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching" (18.1[S 02]: 25-33) speaks to me as a teacher educator questioning how to talk about language with my own students. Jennifer Conrad's "Making Research Real: The Multi-Genre Research Project" (19.1 [S 03]: 13-16) takes me back to my own years teaching high school English and trying to drum up my own enthusiasm for the annual research paper. Finally, Mary Jo Finney's "If I Didn't Let it Go it Would Just Stick On My Chest": From Language to Silence" (18.2[F 02]: 11-14) addresses the very nature of teaching through a tragedy.

A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching

Brian White

It was April of this year, I was teaching the Secondary Literature Methods course for English majors and minors, and the topic for the day was oral language in the classroom. We talked about standard English and what that means to them. We talked about codeswitching, how this works, and if they think it is fair to ask all students to speak the same. We talked about a lot of things in relation to language in the classroom. This topic seemed to raise a lot of debate (some of it instigated by me of course), and the students in my all white methods course have some difficulties in understanding the problem.

It was after this difficult class that I was in my office looking through the back issues of *LAJM* that I had been assigned for this issue when I found Brian White's article "A Very Powerful Tool of Alienation: Introducing Future Teachers to the Problem of Imposed Codeswitching."

Not being that fully familiar with *LAJM* or with MCTE, I was ecstatic to see the inclusion of this article showing the importance of pushing our mostly white future teachers to question what it is like to not be the "normal, the "standard", or the "dominant" in classroom situations. It is too easy to say that codeswitching is beneficial and needed in English classrooms. We need to have our teachers question what their students are experiencing in their classrooms.

Although this article deals with teacher education in a university setting, I would like to think that it still pertains to and reaches teacher in a public school setting. So often when we are teaching, whether in a university or a high school, we become entrenched in our own lives and

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teaching ideas that we forget the importance of every student sitting in front of us on a daily or weekly basis. Reading articles in *LAJM* helps me to remember what it is that is important when I step into my classroom: the students sitting in front of me, every student that is sitting in front of me. I need to remember who they are and what their lives are like. In remembering this, I am more likely to think about

what they are going through, not only sitting in my class, but outside of my class as well with their family, their friends, and their relationships.

Brian White's activity asks students to put themselves into the shoes of "the other." These are the students that we "teach" to succeed in our classrooms by speaking standard English, but we don't question what we are asking them to give up. I am proud to be associated with a journal that recognizes the importance of questioning what exactly it is that we ask students to give up to succeed in our classrooms.

Making Research Real: The Multi-Genre Research Project

Jennifer Conrad

One purpose for *LAJM* has always been to give a place for teachers' voices. It is a place where teachers of all levels can speak and listen to other teachers from across the state. *LAJM* has become a community of educators,

where ideas can be exchanged and conversations can begin and continue to influence educators of all ages and years of experience. It's a place where we can all gather to gain the strength needed to continue our important work, to continue to influence and educate future generations.

When I read Jennifer Conrad's "Making Research Read: The Multi-Genre Research Project," I commiserated on two different levels. I, of course, remember reading hundreds of research papers, dry voiceless research papers. But I also remember these papers on another level. I remember writing these papers – one a year from eighth to eleventh grade. Luckily, my senior English teacher felt we were beyond the typical research paper.

I think every teacher reading Conrad's piece knows what she is talking about and has felt the same way every year when assigning and grading these dreaded papers. But what to do? How do we change the tradition of what we do in English classes? Often, this type of fun, innovative project is given to honors students, students who need very little motivation and are typically the better writers to begin with. What impressed me about this project and with Conrad's classes is that students who do not like to write enjoyed this project. We have all had the students whose papers we read hoping they fulfilled the requirements, hoping that we can at least give them that low D to get them through the class. But the student who did his project on Edgar Allan Poe not only exceeded the expectation of "fulfilling the requirements," he found a connection. He found an interest in an English project, which is every English teacher's wildest fantasy come true: a student who had fun and still fulfilled the learning objectives. If only this were possible everywhere. Well wait... maybe it is!!

If I Didn't Let it Go It Would Just Stick On My Chest: From Language to Silence

Mary Jo Finney

I think all of us remember where we were when we heard, or saw, the tragic events of 9/11. I had returned from a trip late the night before and was awakened by a phone call from my mother screaming, "Are you watching this?!" Stunned, I was glued to the T.V. for hours unable to think, to move, to articulate anything. All I could do was cry. I could not choose articles from LAJM without looking at the entire issue dedicated to 9/11, "Using Words of Healing in the Fall" of 2002.

The story that Mary Jo Finney tells of her college students writing with elementary students is amazing. It is exactly this kind of work that allows college students going into the teaching profession a chance to work with school

age students and to gain experience, hands-on experience. The story of Patti and Theo is about perspective, possibly maturity, but it is definitely about language and the need for some to use language to express while for others, that expression is just too much. For Theo, it seemed that watching a television show on 9/11 reawakened or reinforced his fears and he wanted to write. In his words, "If I didn't let it go it would just stick on my chest" (13). Patti, on the other hand, didn't want to dwell on the negative but wanted to move Theo past the screaming and fires to more positive images of the tragedy. "Patti, admitting she wanted to avoid focusing on the detail of the vent, understands that writing and reading about something can be almost as real as living through it" (13).

As teachers, we need to remember that not everyone we encounter works through things in the same way. The choice to not talk about something is just as much of a choice as choosing the words to represent our feelings. Sometimes we, as English teachers, get so caught up with language that we believe that students must give voice to everything. For some students, though, silence is as necessary in healing as voice.