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Opportunities for Advocacy: Making our Pedagogy Public

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"Are you going to teach the students how to write, or are you just going to teach writing?" a parent asks her daughter's English teacher during Back to School Night. Implicitly, the parent is apparently asking the teacher to explain and describe how students will learn to improve their writing.

Three teachers, a principal, and a curriculum coordinator sit on panel before a group of parents to provide the rationale for a proposed shift to a block schedule, and to answer questions. A parent raises concerns about a perceived "whole language" approach the school's English teachers have presumably exercised, "and we all know where 'whole language' has gotten us," she chortles. Another parent bobbles his head up and down, giggling in agreement. The implications of the statement are only partly revealed: a whole language approach has failed, according to these parents, and a return to basics is needed.

A young man talks with one of his former high school teachers six years after graduation and claims that, "Schools have really lowered their standards." When did the decline begin, the teacher asks. "About six years ago," he reports, and adds that schools have failed to motivate and prepare students for the rigors of today's world. The evidence for his claims emerged from observations of his younger brother's high school experiences.

As teachers and educators, we often hear claims about the failures of schools, teachers, or

administrators—such as from the critics of the opening scenarios; yet, many of the stinging "sound bites" derive from parents dissatisfied with their children's academic progress or with perceived "latest fad" curricula, or from business leaders, politicians, and outside observers who bemoan the quality of schools and inadequate training of students for the workforce. Some critics may not demonstrate intellectual rigor in their claims, or language that acutely portrays their concerns, questions, or understanding of key terms in their complaints.

As educated and trained English Language Arts teachers, we may tacitly respond by snarling in private, or acknowledging the criticisms through silence, or ignoring the discomfort and retreating to our classrooms and shutting the door. We might claim, "They don't know what they're talking about—have they been here?" However, recent national and statewide legislation and assessment trends suggest that we must respond to criticisms and proactively initiate local, community and national conversations about how we educate children and for what purposes. We might begin by embracing the opportunities of the criticisms: to advocate for our students' educational needs, for the professional opinions of teachers and educators, and to reveal expertise that emanates from scholarship, training and experience.

Each of the above scenarios presents opportunities for teachers and educators to respond to the public's implicit questions and critiques. Each also suggests that the public seeks expert opinions: students, parents, and community leaders, among others, want to know the best ways to teach children to read and interpret texts, to write in a range of genres for multiple purposes and audiences, and to negotiate the multiple literacies that their intellectual and personal pursuits will demand. We must prepare research-based answers and initiate and manage

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professional conversations that will lead to and guide productive classroom opportunities for children. Although many of us believe that is what we are doing, we must re-examine our public approach, including how we prepare for classroom instruction and interactions with students.

In “A Wake Up Call,” Laura Roop suggests that we need to re-imagine and clarify our goals of “educational equity and further, literally turn [our] own discipline inside out in order to better serve societal needs,” or “we are going to be watching the standard of living decline for the next fifty years, unless we participate in its transformation.” Nancy Patterson, in “When Good People Do Nothing: The Sin of Silence,” describes an experience she had observing one of her students, who was eventually expelled from school, and states that “it was entirely too easy to be silent...silence was easier than making waves”. Responding to a criticism from one of her colleagues (“You need to be better informed about your profession”), Nancy explains how she “went from defensive to inquisitive” and now looks “for ways to speak up.” And anyone on the Michigan state listserv of English educators knows that she is.

Patricia Dunn, in “Educating the Public about Best Practices in English Language Arts,” states that “we need to communicate better and more often in publications that are read by parents, other teachers, school board members, or others who have a stake in what goes on in the schools.” Furthermore, “Teachers, college professors, and enlightened parents and principals need to advocate for teachers’ informed, professional judgment.” Therefore, we must continue to develop expertise and contribute to seek ways to participate in public discussions.

Yet, as Cathy Fleischer acknowledges, “Busy teachers...who are immersed in the day-to-day life of the classroom have little time or energy to try to correct the many misconceptions that seems to float about schools, about education, about the teaching of reading and writing.” So how, she asks, can teachers “effect a shift in perspective among those in our communities, our state, even our nation? Through an interview with Andy Buchsbaum, an experienced consumer and environmental advocate and lawyer, Fleischer provides some insight into

how teachers and educators can adopt a community activist perspective and examine selected issues and take action by constructing a strategic plan, locating decision makers, figuring out “who your friends are and who your opponents are,” and “cutting” a message that you incorporate with other tactics towards achieving the goals.

Part of our interest in exhorting teachers and educators to communicate more effectively with the public about pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices arose from a connection we observed through Jonathan’s reservist’s work with Navy officers, training them to speak and respond to events publicly through principles of public relations. We both have listened to politicians and administrators stay “on message” about particular issues or projects, and we realized that teachers are rarely trained in how to talk with the public, including to students in their classrooms, about particular issues. Yet, as Buchsbaum states, “Good teachers already know most of the organizing skills they’ll need” to approach advocacy efforts. However, the transfer of skills in one context to unfamiliar ones or arenas will demand an expansion of our angles of vision and clarification of ideas for which we might advocate. In fact, teachers are not, for example, always in concert with beliefs about how to teach reading or writing with their students; therefore, developing consistent messages proves challenging. We wonder: How can teachers and educators prepare local, state or national messages that the public will hear, respond to, and link to their beliefs about educating children? How can we detect and understand perspectives of our students, parents, administrators, or other groups and deliver messages that we can ethically and through research support?

Like many of the writers in this issue, we believe that teachers can impact educational policy, selection of classroom practices, and inform local communities of these professional choices. Kathleen Markovich, in “We Know and Love Words,” explains how English Language Arts teachers are “specially equipped to be advocates in their personal and professional lives” because they “have the power of language,” the experience and knowledge about how to use language for multiple purposes; and she

reveals how she engineered efforts to garner support for her school's English department and its elective program, which provided valuable opportunities for teachers and students. However, underlying the strategies and examples that Markovich presents is a firm belief and embedded framework that advocacy efforts should benefit teachers and students—the people in the classroom.

In “Teacher as Researcher/Researcher as Teacher,” Beth Yeager explains how one of the “contributing factors” to policy changes that have impacted students’ “opportunities for learning complex content and disciplinary knowledge” may have been “that teachers have not had a language to talk about what or how students learn, or how to show learning in the everyday work that children do.” She describes how she observed a discrepancy between what her students “were able to do in their everyday classroom lives in 5th grade and how they were defined in public discourse, including [those] voices of people that might potentially impact students’ future academic lives.” These experiences ignited her “driving force” that shaped and reshaped her multiple angles of vision: she learned how shift between teacher as researcher and researcher as teacher and “to talk empirically” about what happens in classrooms. She demonstrates examples of what Bill Tucker calls the “listener’s stance,” the part of teaching “that the media cannot capture,” but represents “responsive teaching.” According to Tucker, the “discourse of real teaching,” as evidenced by deliberate steps of learning through listening and “bridge thinking,” “lacks the melodrama that the casual reader [of media] expects. Yet it *is* dramatic.”

Kristi Henry, in “Teacher Research: A Mind-Altering Experience,” and Colleen Tucker, in “Encouraging Reciprocity or Relinquishing Authority? The Story of a New Teacher’s Struggle,” new voices of *LAJM*, demonstrate inquiry approaches to classroom dilemmas, which often demands shifts in perspective and change. Henry states that “change, especially important change, is not easy, so it might take a while for my transformation into teacher researcher to stick, but it’s a challenge that I believe will pay off with increased achievement for my students and a keener sense of purpose for me.”

Through continued study and research, teachers can gain the confidence and empirical information that will lead to answers to dilemmas, such as Tucker’s, “how much credence” should teachers “afford to the discouraging feedback of parents and students? Should I ignore them and trust my own decisions?” She suggests that experience obviously helps in preparing responses to criticisms, and her example makes visible the continued need to support new teachers, especially as they learn how to examine their classrooms and talk about how learning occurs and how it is assessed.

In “Teachers on the Boundary: New Teacher Action Research as Professional Development,” Patricia Bills explains and describes how the New Teacher Initiative launched by the National Writing Project has provided opportunities for “new teachers to conduct action research projects in their own classrooms” and share them within a professional community. Through a research process the teachers learn “that good teaching occurs after careful, meaningful reflection and practice.” Bills presents an overview of three example teachers whose research originated from classroom inquiries and was supported by their professional community at the Third Coast Writing Project. Suzan Aiken examined a process of teaching students to incorporate their desire to write personal notes with responding to peers’ writing through a “Delivery Workshop.” Lindsay Steenbergen noticed that her college-bound seniors had learned how to “do school” and routinely completed assignments, including “all the process requirements” and “adequately” addressing the topic; however, the students made “elementary errors” that distracted from the writing. Through action research she uncovered methods suggested by Tom Romano, among others, that linked with her classroom findings and guided her to help students see “value of editing and revising.” Alicia Dubisky, a third new teacher, discovered “a much more interpretative and interactive approach to Shakespeare,” after modifying curriculum that “allowed students to zone out, and left me feeling as though I had not really taught the play.” All three teachers demonstrated how action research can lead to improved instructional opportunities for students, and they exemplify

professionalism in building on experienced scholars and teachers.

Deborah Smith, in “On the Shoulders of Giants: Leaders in the Field of Literacy as Teacher Advocates,” urges teachers to “verse [themselves] in the research findings so that we can advocate for the individual child in an age where over-standardization is making that much more difficult.” She implicitly argues for a theoretical framework that will allow teachers to “create the environment necessary” for practices that we believe best serve students, e.g., writer’s workshop approaches for writing instruction. Finally, she states that teachers “must turn to the literacy leaders whose research shows the importance of student choice, workshop approaches, pleasure reading, community building in the classroom, and authentic assessments.” Classroom teachers have the capacity to become local literacy leaders and make a difference in how students, parents and other community members hear and understand the curricular choices and opportunities we believe are best for children. In the concluding article, “The Cycle of Teaching,” Scott Peterson states, “We have the power to correct our mistakes, to re-invent ourselves and become something better. We can build into our teaching lives a consistent pattern of reflection, growth and renewal.”

As you begin reading these articles, consider: It is unethical for teachers to publicly voice political opinions to students, especially, for example, which candidate to vote for; however, teaching is a political act: we choose some methods and not others; we select some texts, but not others. Each of the choices we make is done within the contexts of our personal beliefs, values and professional communities.

If we consciously select methods, texts, and language of and for the classroom, and a research

base supports these choices, we must strive to reveal to the public the purposes and value of those choices. We are invested in teaching children literacy strategies and skills; what we say publicly should matter and inform local, state and national literacy policies. But we must continue to strengthen our knowledge of disciplinary content, of how children learn, including research that supports the claims, and of how to effectively participate in the public conversations about these elements of our pedagogy.

And a Couple of ‘Very Special’ Announcements (with apologies to the cast of *Blossom*)

Readers should anticipate our next issue (Fall/Winter 2006), “Celebrating Two Decades of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*.” This special issue encapsulates the growth of our journal from its inception to now.

This issue, developed under the outstanding editorial leadership of Central Michigan University’s Elizabeth Brockman, Laura Renzi, Susan Steffel, and John Dinan, brings back retrospective looks at all the editorial eras of the *LAJM* since its inception. This issue includes a selection of ‘editors’ choice’ articles from throughout the history of the *LAJM*, commentaries on the history of the *LAJM*, and contemporary discussions of the importance of the journal in the professional lives of teachers.

The upcoming MCTE Conference is also a very special one. World famous education advocate Alfie Kohn will keynote. This is a one-time opportunity to listen to one of the most outspoken and interesting figures in American education. Readers can learn more about Kohn at www.alfiekohn.org. The conference is also chock-full of excellent Michigan teachers who will be giving talks on everything ranging from grammar to technology to literature and everything in-between.

There is a registration form on page 73. More information about the conference can be found at the MCTE website: www.mienglishteacher.org.