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A Wake Up Call

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Entrepreneurial billionaire Bill Gates says high schools are outmoded. Journalist Thomas Friedman says the world is flat. Policy wonk Lou Glazer says Michigan's economic problems are structural, not cyclical. What does any of that have to do with the teachers teaching English in public schools throughout our state?

As it turns out, plenty. Two major forces—globalization and technological innovation—are causing rethinking and re-imagining in every line of work, in every governmental agency, here and around the planet. The American educational system—both K-12 and higher education—is not immune to these unstoppable forces. In addition, a potentially catastrophic environmental problem—global warming—also calls for dramatic change and collective action from us all. These issues lead me to take a fairly radical stand: that English teachers in Michigan must actively concern themselves with educational equity and further, literally turn their own discipline inside out in order to better serve societal needs. But let me backtrack a moment and explain how a high school English teacher-turned National Writing Project director came to be reading and listening to economists, futurists, civil rights advocates, and policymakers, let alone finding common ground with them.

I've long been an avid reader of many genres—poetry, fiction, and various forms of nonfiction, from history to psychology to religion and philosophy. When I walk into a library or bookstore, I'm appreciative of the incredible variety of perspectives texts can convey—that cacophony of voices reminds me that the world is large, but individuals can influence groups to think differently and even to take action. I'm no techie, but I'm awestruck at the accelerating flow of information

available through the Internet. It is incredible that we can now literally see the changes wrought in the human brain through learning—MRIs can now record the growth of new neural networks as they form, whether through repeated actions or study.

I have multiple degrees in English, and a Ph. D. in English and Education—all of that higher learning teaches me to value my discipline's strengths, but to be conscious of the relatively short history of this field of study. For the last six years, while serving as outreach director for a school of education, I've been "listening in"—sitting alongside district superintendents, engineers, legislative analysts, and folks from various disciplines, as they talk about what is needed from our educational system. I've tried to empathize with perspectives unfamiliar to me, and to see our area of study from their eyes. It's

changed my own perspective. Frankly, I now feel that, while much of what English has to offer is simply crucial to young people, our approaches to teaching English in secondary schools deserve serious critique. And I've been noticing that even as I and my fellow English educators complain about the testing juggernaut unleashed by the No Child Left Behind legislation, many of us fail to acknowledge the pervasive inequities we've tolerated in our schools, districts, state and nation. Too many English departments in Michigan and across the nation have responded to NCLB by retrenching: a textbook in every backpack. A "classic" in every semester, a few grammar and vocabulary exercises, and some timed writing in preparation for tests. Pure cowardice—to take threadbare actions that simply cannot and will not prepare students for their futures, or disrupt the status quo in any way.

Meanwhile, the gap between student lives and outdated curricula grows, becoming a seemingly unbridgeable chasm. How bizarre: outside of school, students are playing complex video games, reading magazines and lengthy *Harry Potter* tomes, sharing

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audio files, blogging, even making films and editing them, while inside of school, they're grinding through yet another fine work of Shakespeare, without actually witnessing, or engaging in, performance (and too often, without actually reading the play.) Of course, it's also true that many innovative practitioners in Michigan are engaging young people in valuable learning that connects with student lives and futures. But my point remains: what is required is bold re-imagining of English language arts, and of education more generally. That need is especially acute in our state, where we are going to be watching the standard of living decline for the next fifty years, unless we participate in its transformation. Somehow, we simply have to set aside our excuses, turn our attention to our own learning for the sakes of our students, and risk engaging in dramatic experimentation.

From Industrial Age to Information Age to Conceptual Age

In a book entitled *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink argues that "As individuals grow richer, as technologies become more powerful, and as the world grows more connected, these three forces eventually gather enough collective momentum to nudge us into a new era" (49). He says that "Mere survival today depends on being able to do something that overseas knowledge workers can't do cheaper, that powerful computers can't do faster, and that satisfies one of the nonmaterial, transcendent desires of an abundant age" (51). Pink claims that "The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys" (1).

While the authors of *A New Agenda for a New Michigan* concentrated their attention on moving Michigan's economy from a heavily industrialized one to a knowledge worker-based system, rather than discussing the shift Pink uncovers, they join him in calling for a reculturation that foregrounds citizens' love of learning, creativity and entrepreneurship, and embrace of diversity.

Pink and the folks behind *A New Agenda* for a New Michigan are writing for audiences of business executives and community leaders, but I think English teachers could take heart—if they are willing to go down the path to transformation of our discipline. The kind of schooling that is being called for does exist—in a handful of schools and classrooms. We need to grasp that the future of public education depends on our will to make rich learning opportunities widely available, and to stop settling for widespread mediocrity.

Not "Lit/Comp" but Multiple Critical Literacies

While I am a lover of literary works, and one who values the kinds of close readings textual critics can do, it also seems evident to me that English departments should be supporting the growth of fluency, strategic flexibility and critical analysis of widely varying texts by adolescents. As long as we valorize the novel and short story, and behave as though we are trying to prepare English majors, or caricatures of these, we will keep doing what we're doing—which too often seems to be resulting in marginal, uncritical literacies. Better to have students read voraciously across a wide range of genres. Better to have them become increasingly self-aware of the

processes they use to make sense from text. Better to have them become critical and analytical about the sources of evidence, argument, and emotion evoked by texts—whether read silently, performed,

or skimmed. To go down this path will mean letting go of the familiar routines of English classrooms. It will require that English teachers become teachers of strategic reading, and much more interested in texts across myriad disciplines.

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Students as Creators and Makers

As important as critical, fluent reading is for all learners, we simply must position our students

as creators and makers of a wide variety of texts, including the full range of technology-enabled genres. The skill of composing text—oral, written and visual—is not optional. It is part of the work of virtually every discipline, and essential to a well-educated citizenry. We need to be deeply informed about the teaching of writing, and to understand the relationship between writing and thinking. We need to make sure that all the students in our schools are having access to skilled coaching regarding writing. Writing is not secondary to reading, and we shouldn't ever position it as such.

Use of Technologies

Imagine, for a minute, that every single student in your school had his/her own current laptop computer, that the media center was current, but that fewer textbooks were in use. How might that change teaching and learning in English language arts? How might the school day be transformed? Too crazy to contemplate in a time of fiscal crisis, you say? Did you know that the State of Maine has purchased laptops for every middle school student in a substantive attempt to reduce the digital divide? Did you know that the nation of Australia has also taken this approach?

Arguing for Equity

Above all, we English teachers must open our eyes and begin to notice how our course offerings and pedagogical approaches sometimes exacerbate inequities. It simply can't be right that some of our students are reading widely, writing extensively, and being given opportunities to develop robust literacies that will serve them well, while others read minimally, write marginally or not at all, and can be guaranteed multiple semesters of remediation if they can find their way to any sort of continuing education. Let's not pretend this is a matter of student or parental choice; it is partly a matter of opportunity and access. Not necessarily our fault, of course—but why, why, why do we sit by quietly as so many young people are literally, not metaphorically, disenfranchised? We need to speak out—and find out—about the greatly differing material conditions that exist in our schools. Other nations simply do not

permit this sort of unequal ground condition—why should we? In this state, or across this nation?

I'm hoping I sound more urgent than shrill to you, my colleagues. We need to become our bravest selves, and to remember the profound courage involved in speaking truth to power. We also need to remember that this is not our struggle alone—our colleagues across the disciplines and across all levels, from early childhood to post-collegiate, surely feel this urgency and notice the ways the educational system is not able to serve our current social or economic needs. To put this in perspective, note that the polar icecaps are melting; New Orleans lies in rubble. There is an opportunity present in this collective failure. An opportunity to clarify and articulate our hopes and dreams, an opportunity to set aside many of the dead ends and wrong turns, and begin anew, for a new age.

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About the Author

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