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We Know and Love Words

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English teachers are specially equipped to be advocates in their personal and professional lives. We know and love words. We have the power of language, and we should use that power to speak out and to write when we feel the need and/or when we need the pleasure. My personal history as a speaker and writer probably has its roots in the Vietnam War era, when I was an English major at a state university. Born right after World War II, a child of Japanese parents, one who served in the U.S. Army and one who was interned in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, I was raised to quietly fit in—to be a good American, to speak English and not Japanese, to use a fork and not chopsticks, to drink Pepsi and not green tea.

I graduated from high school in 1965, and several of my classmates were drafted and sent to Vietnam. In college, I encountered my first protests as I saw English professors and fellow English majors carrying signs and speaking out against the war. Meanwhile, I heard news of my classmates' deaths in Vietnam. My sophomore year, I joined the protest marches, sometimes encountering lines of police wielding batons and lines of fraternity brothers carrying sticks and shovels. During that time, my father phoned me—until then, all calls from home came from my mother. My father was angry, asking if I was among the protesters he saw on the TV news. "That is not why I am sending you to college," he reprimanded and hung up.

Much to the dismay of my parents, thus began a life of advocacy in my personal and professional life.

Advocacy for the Department

When I had earned a degree and finished student teaching, I had the good fortune of being hired by my master teacher, Lucy Contor, who was a mentor and forward thinker. The Hoover High School English Department, under her leadership, was creating an elective program, offering semester courses such as The Short Story, Modern Novel, Basic Composition, Advanced Composition, Creative Writing, and Poetry for juniors and seniors. As the courses were written and approved through the district, the offerings grew and opposition began as other high schools wanted to adopt some electives also.

Counselors and curriculum supervisors started questioning the elective program, and we had to defend it, successfully, a number of times. Then the National Council of Teachers of English started a new program, the NCTE Centers of Excellence, local programs that would be recognized for excellent, innovative teaching practices. I seized the opportunity to end the opposition: how could the district question or threaten an NCTE Center of Excellence? So I wrote the application, prepared for the visit, and drafted a brochure. In 1985, we were named an NCTE Center of Excellence, and the elective program still thrives at Hoover High School. At district meetings, when English teachers from other schools introduce themselves, they say, "I teach freshmen and juniors" or "I teach sophomores and reading." Hoover teachers say, "I teach Shakespeare and mythology" or "I teach Advanced Composition and Women in Literature."

So early in my career, I was mentored by an English department that circled the wagons to defend their professionalism and their programs. I learned to head off opposition in a positive manner whenever possible. If a principal was not adept with language, we became his/her proofreaders and drafted his/her letters. We wrote the job description for the office manager. We drafted the three-year accreditation report. We proofread the graduation program. What did we ask for in return? One more English teacher, a little more money in the department budget, a few more books each year, a computer lab—a few extras that helped the students and teachers in the English department. Ah, the power of language.

As the years have passed, I have tried to pass on the penchant for advocacy to the current members of the department. This year, I retired, but before I left school, I gave all department members a copy of a two-page document I wrote in 1990 that outlines the benefits of an elective Language Arts program because the district, facing more years of No Child Left Behind and low Academic Performance Index scores, is trying to make the unified district more “uniform.” We have seven comprehensive high schools in a large urban district of 80,000 total students who speak 90 different native languages. “Diverse” is obviously a word that describes our student population, but the district is mounting a drive to make curriculum the same across the district, which poses a threat to the elective classes we teach in our department. This May, the department elected a new chair, and the votes went to the candidate who said, “The electives save me everyday, and I’m not afraid to fight.”

To head off a potential assault, we started developing standards-based department lessons. Our goal is to have twelve department lessons in place—a unified school approach which uses the state standards and delivers lessons designed for our particular student population. We looked at the data, pinpointed areas of improvement, and began working on lessons. So far we have (1) an introductory interview and speech lesson, (2) common editing marks and lessons for teaching and using them, (3) a unit on The Sentence, which uses sentence combining and sentence expansion to promote language awareness and growth, and (4) a unit on Literary Analysis: Character. In progress are lessons on Literary Analysis: Theme, vocabulary development, informational texts, and Literary Analysis: Author’s Purpose and Tone.

Advocacy for the School

As the political cycles have come and gone, I have written mission statements, letters to the school board, and letters to the department chairs at my school advocating what we know as good, strong English/Language Arts instruction. We have had Schoolwide Write since 1995. Once a year during third period, everyone stops all across the school and

writes an essay. After school, ten table leaders and ten table-leaders-in-training read and select anchor essays for scoring. In two sessions after school, all certificated personnel, working in ten cross-curricular groups, read the essays. Each essay is scored twice, and the students carry the essays from teacher to teacher because we have agreed to count the scores in every class.

From Schoolwide Write, we have developed a number of schoolwide policies such as: 1) all writing must be in complete sentences—no fragments on study guides or chapter questions; 2) an emphasis on using academic language; 3) a common list of command verbs on a poster in every classroom so all teachers use words such as “Compare,” “Describe,” or “Evaluate” the same way. Schoolwide Write has been the vehicle for meaningful discussions about our students and their needs and has empowered teachers across the disciplines to feel confident about creating and grading writing assignments. Coordinating Schoolwide Write is a time-consuming task, but English department chairs at our school have been willing to do the work because of its value. If we want students to think and write well, we need writing across the disciplines, a curricular practice all teachers need to advocate in order to pass on the power of language.

This January, when the district named our principal to a district-level administrative job, our teachers were obviously concerned about what the district planned to do and who would run our school. A district level administrator was scheduled to speak to our faculty. At an ad hoc department chair meeting, I was selected first speaker—first to interrupt the district administrator if “the plan” was inadequate or unsatisfactory. When it was obvious there was no plan in place, I raised my hand and began, “I’m sorry, but that is not good enough,” and went on to explain we were facing a February Exit Exam (a state graduation requirement) that all

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600 of our sophomores would be taking for the first time, a March four-day accreditation visit, three days of state testing for the entire school in April, and May Advanced Placement testing. All of these are significant tasks, the results of which would affect the lives and daily work of our students and teachers for years to come. Obviously we needed help if our principal was leaving and there was no plan in place to immediately name a new principal.

Other voices chimed in, and the now-harried district administrator stepped aside to use his cell phone. Within five minutes, we had extra campus supervision and a vice principal on special assignment moved to our campus. Sometimes one voice opens the floodgates and the voices of many are enough to startle the inert wheels of bureaucracy into action. Ah, the power of language.

District-level Advocacy

A dear friend and colleague, Wanda Moore, and I earned district reputations as outspoken English teachers. Whenever district coordinators proposed yet another outrageous idea, such as portfolios for all our students (150 portfolios per teacher, but no defined purpose and no plan to transfer them as the students transferred.), Wanda and I raised our hands and our voices. Once, Wanda and I agreed to attend a district meeting and say absolutely nothing, and we did. We sat in the back of the room and said nothing for the entire ninety minutes. Later in the week, we heard that our opposition at the district meeting was discussed at a cabinet-level meeting, and no one believed we had been silent the entire time. We vowed never to be silent again—if the cabinet was going to discuss our opposition, that opposition would at least be our own words, the power of our own language.

Last year when I attended a district inservice on the McDougal-Littell Language of Literature series and was told by the presenter to replace novels and plays with the anthology only, I raised my hand and made a passionate plea for real literature—books students could hold in the hands and carry home to read, books teachers love because that passion for reading is contagious and students can tell when teachers love what they are teaching. I also wrote

to Sheridan Blau, one of the textbook series editors, to see if abandoning novels and plays and using only the anthology was the intent of the creators of the series. Of course it was not, and I used his two-page response over and over to argue for money to purchase more novels for the students in our department.

This year at a district level language arts representatives meeting, an administrator held up a *Language of Literature* text and said, “We gave you the curriculum,” meaning the district purchased the texts for all ninth and tenth grade students. I responded, “Stop calling that text ‘the curriculum.’ It’s a textbook, and a textbook is not curriculum.” The department I left will have to fight because this administrator was just named our school’s new principal.

Personal Advocacy

In my personal life, I write letters furiously—to McDonald’s Corporation about the young man who ignored my elderly parents (they received coupons for free specialty sandwiches), to the State Parks Foundation about the rude telemarketer (I no longer contribute and my name was removed from their mail and phone lists), to the University of California, Los Angeles, regarding the inadequate living conditions of the dorm our daughter was assigned to (full refund even though our daughter moved out six weeks into the quarter), to the Transportation Safety Administration regarding the zipper the airport inspector broke on my twelve-year-old suitcase (a check for half the cost of the replacement bag), to Toyota Motors, Inc., Customer Experience Dept., regarding the deceitful tactics of the sales manager at an authorized dealership (I’m still waiting for a coupon for a free Toyota).

We are English teachers because we know and love words. We read novels with a pencil in hand because we cannot resist marking key passages and recurring imagery. When we are reading student work and come across words we have read before, we look for that other essay or homework assignment because we know when we have read these words before. The next day, we give the lecture, “Don’t copy someone else’s homework. Don’t lend your essay to a friend.

English teachers know and love words, and we know when we have read these words before.” When we are reading student work and notice students trying new words or attempting new sentence structures, we smile and write “great” in the margin.

We are English teachers because we know and love words, and we need to use the power of language to do what is good and right for our students, for our schools, and for our families and ourselves. We need to speak up and we need to write. We won’t always get a computer lab or a free Toyota, but we will know in our hearts and minds that we put up a good fight. We will have earned the right to complain, and we will be left, not with a bitter taste, but a sweeter taste in our mouths for the words we have willingly and wisely used.

About the Author

Kathleen Markovich taught from 1970-2006, in the English Department at Hoover High School in the Fresno Unified School District in Fresno, CA. She is a fellow of the California Reading and Literature Project and of the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project (SJVWP). She has published widely in scholarly books and journals. She conducts workshops on a variety of topics, most recently on response and revision, schoolwide write, and on-demand writing..