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SHARING THE JOURNEY: NEW TEACHERS IN MICHIGAN REFLECT ON THEIR EXPERIENCES

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English language arts are the vehicles of communication by which we live, work, share, and build ideas and understandings of the present, reflect on the past, and imagine the future. Through the English language arts, we learn to appreciate, integrate, and apply what is learned for real purposes in our homes, schools, communities, and workplaces.

Michigan Department of Education

Teaching allows us to find ourselves, to connect to others, and to reflect on what we know and believe. Teaching English language arts or communication classes in particular help us to shine the academic spotlight on the literature that reflects and shapes our world, to focus on the kinds of writing and verbal skills that allow us to speak our minds and better understand how we are connected to our world, and to engage students' imaginations and critical thinking abilities. With every job there are joys and sorrows, times of great satisfaction and deep regret, days when we feel as if we did our best and days when we know that we could have done better. In most jobs, individuals are not directly responsible for large numbers of young people whose futures are shaped by directed interaction with individuals, groups, and texts. Teachers of English language arts meet that challenge on a daily basis, but rarely in the first year or two do they have time or energy to reveal how they do so. This essay is meant to offer a glimpse into the lives of several newer teachers in Michigan, snapshots of life-as-teacher for us to contemplate as we consider our own careers in education.

In preparation for this essay, I interviewed teachers who come from different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds but who have much in common as newer teachers of English language arts in Michigan. Jacquie Johr is in her second year of teaching English 9 and Composition at Gobles High School in Gobles, Michigan. Suzan Aiken is in her first year of teaching Public Speaking, Debate, and Journalism (yearbook) at Colon Junior/Senior High School. Both Jacquie and Suzan are graduates of the English Education program at Western Michigan University. Margaret Fierstine is in her first year of teaching English and Spanish at Fulton High School in Middleton, Michigan. She is a graduate of the English and Spanish Education programs at Northern Michigan University.

I get it all.

Satisfaction and joy are regularly experienced by the teachers with whom I spoke. When asked what she loves about her job, Suzan shared that she feels fully supported by her fellow teachers and school administrators: "I have an excellent principal who practices an 'open-door policy' with her staff. The teachers I work with are positive and hopeful and supportive of each other." Her administrators are encouraging of "creative teachers who are willing to take some risks, think creatively, and try new approaches." Suzan values the opportunity to be innovative and to have her risk-taking be regarded as a positive pedagogical move.

Jacquie says that she loves going to work *because* she is an English teacher. She puts it this way:

I get it all. Not only do I get to watch the students experience required content but I get to lead classroom discussions about controversial themes and stereotyp[ed] characters, while at the same time [I watch] the students make personal connections to these fictional creations called literature. I get to see aspects of a student that make him or her an individual, and that is why I go to work each day.

Margaret, too, relates her happiness with student success; teaching is wonderful when you “see them begin to understand something for the first time, when you get them to see how far they’ve come, or when you read stories to them and they actively participate in the discussion afterward.” She, like Jacquie, likes the challenge of planning a great lesson, finding just the right story to illustrate the concepts students are studying. Part of the joy of teaching a language class (like English or Spanish), Margaret says, comes in continuing to read stories and novels to prepare for class. I must confess that as an English teacher at Northern Michigan University, the same concept holds true: This past summer I spent lazy U.P. days reading all the novels I selected for my fall course on Literature for Young Adults. Margaret and I both marvel when we realize that we are being paid to do what we ask our students to do – to read and write and think about texts and the world and our place in it.

I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to be challenged, to solve problems, and to think critically about the learning process and my classroom.

“With any job in any industry there are challenges – confusion of learning names, learning procedures, understanding what resources are available and then understanding how to use them. And these are my challenges,” Suzan says. However, there are specific challenges to teaching, and to teaching in Michigan in particular. For instance, Jacquie mentions the struggle to adjust classroom practices and assignments to accommodate students with 504 plans or those with documented special needs while also meeting the needs of the other twenty-five or so students in the same class. Though all education programs focus on how to teach students who have special needs (in various academic areas as well as grade levels), there never seems to be enough time or information to prepare teachers to feel comfortable working effectively with that important issue. Suzan notes the particular difficulties that arise from many students’ individual and family situations, which might include

“language barriers, financial barriers, family problems and negative pressures from other students to make choices about drugs, alcohol, etc.” These issues are certainly not limited to students in her district. In fact, many new teachers are surprised to discover themselves in environments where an interminable haze of drugs and apathy can threaten students’ learning on a regular basis.

In our conversation, Suzan also referred to the problem of district planning during an time of uncertain budgets, which for her meant no computer for the first week and a half of school, too few textbooks in some classes, and, in the case of one newer class, “no textbooks and no materials, just the ‘standards and benchmarks’ and the Michigan Curriculum Framework.” Some schools are making changes to their curriculum and the scheduling of classes to help improve funding problems and declining enrollments. One local U.P. school, Republic-Michigamme, has adopted a four-day school week to help lower educational costs for their district. In another district, the one in which Margaret teaches, there is a block schedule, which means that students take each class for a longer period of time each day but for only one semester per year. Basically, then, students have all of their English classes in only one school term, which has Margaret and others concerned about “retention of information, performance on state tests, etc.” Unlike many of her former classmates who are now teaching in schools with more traditional fifty-minute class periods, Margaret prepares to teach classes that last nearly ninety minutes each. She notes, “It’s difficult for some students to stay on task for so long. Some kids get restless because there’s no break.” Margaret tries to vary activities frequently so that students stay motivated and on-task, but she finds it difficult sometimes to plan for such an extended period of instruction, especially given what seem to be students’ shrinking attention spans.

Though many teachers’ challenges come from the environments in which they work, one of the most powerful difficulties in teaching can be one’s own concept of self. Much like student teachers, first and second year teachers are often

hardest on themselves. Self-reflection, which we advocate in education courses, can help teachers to think critically about their pedagogical choices, but often such reflection can make novice teachers hypersensitive to their weaknesses and in some cases, damage confidence levels. Jacquie says that in her first year of teaching, she sometimes lacked the self-assurance to get up in front of a room full of students whom she imagined were waiting for her to fail. She now realizes that it was she herself who was anticipating disaster, saying, "I feel better about the content and climate of my class [this year], so I have been able to take a few more successful chances with writing and literature ... I had to go through all of the self-doubt, naivety, and weak assignments to be a better teacher this year. I hope that this growth continues exponentially." Likewise, Suzan says that self-reflection and evaluation are essential, and that "participating and contributing member of the classroom community, learning from students as they learn from you ... [this is what we call] "being a life-long learner." This concept should be easily identified by *LAJM* readers as a goal of the English language arts curriculum in Michigan.

I am lucky because I had a positive and inclusive experience in my education, with my course work, and in my student teaching.

Suzan notes that it is an especially difficult task for teacher educators to prepare students to be ready for their "solo flights" in the classroom that "ultimately test and challenge new teachers to 'sink or swim'." She counts herself lucky to have had in her Education and Communication programs at Western Michigan University "professors who gave [her] tremendous support and insight." Similarly, Margaret reports that her experiences in methods and in the student teacher seminar at Northern were invaluable in preparing her reflect on her teaching: "It was good to hear what the others were experiencing in their assignments; it helped me feel less alone." Likewise, Jacquie remarks that her experiences with Western's English and Education departments were excellent. However, she says it

was in her student teaching and first year of at Gobles where she realized how much there is in teacher preparation that can't be taught. Jacquie states

I could have never anticipated what it was going to be like behind the desk, podium, or overhead. The majority of what I knew about the middle/high school experience had been from a rather different point of view. Who would have ever guessed that teachers go to school long before the students to wait in line at the copy machine, or that teachers can only get a pass to use the restroom at lunch or during their planning period, and even that sometimes is difficult! ... But really, there is nothing that can prepare you for your first shot at your own classroom.

At the recent annual conference of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, I spoke to many students and teachers from Michigan colleges and universities (Eastern, Western, Central, MSU, U of Michigan, etc.), and the consensus was that the teacher education programs in our state are preparing well those who are in line to take over the English language arts classrooms in Michigan and across the United States. Most mentioned the importance of self-reflection as well as frequent conversation with peers to one's personal growth as a teacher and a member of the educational community. Suzan touches on a related issue in the following quote:

I feel I was fortunate because I had professors who taught how to teach writing and taught how to evaluate.^o I attended training during my student teaching on the teaching and evaluating of writing.^o I had tactics and practice ... but the actual application is much different.^o [Now] I do not have a mentor teacher or someone else in the room with whom to bounce ideas around.^o I am on my own.^o I am not in a vacuum, just trapped in a classroom, in a rigorous schedule, in a challenged environment with little time or resources to consider questions about methods and often times have to just "do".

Michigan is my home and where I wish to make my contribution...I cannot imagine being anywhere else. I love it here.

All of the teachers I interviewed focused on their relationships with students. For instance, Margaret reflected on a recent poetry assignment in which students analyzed song lyrics to understand poetic devices. She says, "I had them illustrate their songs wherever possible, and they loved it! Some even turned the assignment in early because they were so anxious to get my feedback!" Margaret also acknowledges that students look to her as a role model, noting, "I have been trying to read with them and to them, to let them see that I love to read so that they might fall in love with literature, too. Maybe I'll try to write with them too, that might be fun!" And though she's busy with three preparations, advising the local chapter of the National Honor Society and the sophomore class, and serving as the middle school track coach, Margaret remembers that the best teachers are ones who are renewed daily. She enjoys daily two-mile runs with her dog, Lila because it gives her "a chance to let things out, to escape from stress and to feel a communion with nature." She also values spending time with her husband of less than a year; Margaret says that talking about her day during a shared meal and getting about seven hours of sleep a night help keep her energy levels up during class.

Suzan views her students as the best part of her job of teaching: "The students are uniquely supportive of each other...giving words of encouragement to the ...student in our class who is afraid to give a speech in front of the class ... the class sizes are relatively small so that I can give focused attention to student learning." In addition, she remarks, "Precisely what I love about this job is not yet determined ... save for the students themselves. Their resilience and their need for positive, hopeful energy is what keeps me propelling forward." Like their colleagues, Suzan, Margaret, and Jacquie have begun to discover some of the emotional dividends that go with teaching – the joy

of seeing a struggling student finally succeed with an impromptu speech; the pleasure that comes with reading a compelling piece of literature aloud to a room full of attentive young people who later engage in thoughtful discussion about the text; the elation that comes from responding to a well-crafted and surprisingly innovative poem or essay. These are the reasons that we come back, year after year, to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

I found the following quote on the web site of the National Council of Teachers of English: "The first year of teaching can be full of trials and tribulations as well as triumphs and successes. Unfortunately, 20% of new teachers leave the profession in their first three years." It seems that for the novice teachers I interviewed, connecting personally to young people, feeling free to be creative, and being supported by fellow teachers and administrators are the kinds of things that will bring them back for another year of teaching in the English Language Arts.

I'd like to end with a nod to the teachers who have been working in our schools for a while, to those who take time out of their (often) chaotic lives as instructors and leaders to mentor and guide novice teachers like Jacquie, Margaret, and Suzan. Recently, in our local newspaper, Rebecca Cook, a Marquette citizen and the wife of Marquette Senior High English teacher, wrote a powerful response to an editorial which painted what she calls "a very inaccurate picture of the amount of time that a teacher works during the average week." In her letter, Cook offered a list of activities that her husband undertakes as a professional educator. His work load includes assigning (to approximately 150 students) "one paper a week plus quizzes, short essays and other assignments ... [which are] read, graded, scored into a grade book and onto the computer" (4A). He also spends time "planning, [...] generating progress reports, and conferencing with students, parents and colleagues as needed," notwithstanding making time to attend "staff meetings, committee meetings, and extracurricular activities" – adding up to "about a 60-hour-plus work week." Teacher candidates in my (and any other)

English Education program might peruse this list and shudder at the thought of having to do all that (and more) starting with their very first year of teaching. Nevertheless, year after year teacher education programs in Michigan graduate hundreds of teachers eager to take on those tasks as new members of the teaching profession, usually for what the public acknowledges (yet somehow continues to accept) is too little pay. The fact that Margaret, Suzan and Jacquie are not only willing but enthusiastic to teach and share their lives with the young people of Michigan is a testament to the fact that teaching is, as Leila Christenbury reminds us, “some of the most important work in the world [which] transcends the concept of job or even career or profession into the sphere of *vocation* – as that word is used in the sense of being called, being chosen for a life role” (7).

Newer teachers and especially those in the English language arts, have incredible responsibilities to their students, to their communities, and to themselves. Let us hope that, like Mike Cook and countless other veteran teachers, those who are just beginning their lives as teachers in Michigan schools will earn their students’ respect, their communities’ support, and their loved ones’ appreciation for answering the challenging call to teach.

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Suzan Aiken, Coloma Junior Senior High School, Coloma, MI; Margaret Fierstine, Fulton High School, Middleton, MI; Jacquie Johr, Gobles High School, Gobles, MI

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