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Back Matter

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Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 1996

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

Compiled by Charles Suhor, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the thirteenth annual trends and issues report by the commissions. Only one of the commission reports is included in this issue.

The Commission on Composition (Christine Kline, Director) acknowledges that major attention must be paid to understanding both the *possibilities and the constraints of technology in the field of composition*. In the age of Internet, what are the emerging definitions of authorship? Of authority? What are the possibilities of such access to information? What are the limits? Where do primary influences in the field reside? Who has access to computer technology? What are the equity issues? In what ways are composing processes and modes of discourse changing in an increasingly technological world? The Commission will direct attention to these issues in upcoming convention sessions and will seek to collaborate with other NCTE bodies concerned with these matters.

In the area of *assessment in writing* the Commission is concerned that high-stakes portfolio assessment may override the instructional, reflective uses of portfolios in classrooms. The value of portfolios remains in the multiple glimpses of writing afforded to students and teachers in the reflection and learning from that deliberative look. The writing and selection of pieces for reflection and growth should arise out of student and classroom issues. We also point to the emphasis on *a-contextual writing prompts in many districtwide and statewide testing programs*. These prompts, in the absence of ongoing staff development in districts, may come to comprise a primary mode of writing in classrooms. Such writing does not serve skillful and wide writing growth.

The *link between imposed assessment and instructional change is in need of continuing examination*. Assessment should derive from and be congruent with our best knowledge about writing, learning, and the nature of school change. Too often the nature of change is overlooked in the consideration of effective, theory-driven practice. A single, narrow effort to drive change, as with imposed assessment, is insufficient. Major attention must be paid to substantial, ongoing staff development at all school levels. Teachers still struggle to persuade school communities of the very legitimacy of collaboratively developed, multi-tiered staff development as the critical component in improvement of learning and teaching.

The Commission again expresses *concern about the teaching of writing in both teacher preparation programs and graduate programs for returning teachers*. How much attention is actually being paid to the teaching of writing? Is it equal to the attention given to reading? Are there specific program requirements for coursework in the teaching of writing? If writing is presented as a component of language arts courses, how large is the focus? In teacher preparation programs, who is actually teaching writing methodology? Are the teachers themselves highly informed about the field?

This is part of the ongoing, larger concern about the *continued subordination of writing to literature in secondary schools and colleges and of writing, and to reading in the elementary schools*. Teacher preparation programs may still reflect this unequal attention to what should be the equal and intertwined activities of literacy. The concern extends to the lack of attention to the other major language processes that help us, as James Moffett states, "compose the world"—the language process of talk.

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Send form and check payable to MCTE to: Ray Lawson, Secretary-Treasurer, MCTE,
P.O. Box 1152, Rochester, Michigan
48307

LANGUAGE ARTS JOURNAL OF MICHIGAN 1996-1997

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Reaching the Hard to Reach

Every teacher knows those tell-tale signs—bored looks, loud sighs, “show-me attitudes.” These are the students who challenge us to reach them. They may be Advanced Placement seniors, at-risk middle school students, or tuned-out elementary students. What do you do to involve them? What assumptions do you operate on? How do you work to involve all the kinds of students you are assigned each year? What kind of teaching works best with disinterested students? What’s your take on getting students into their work? How do you create a classroom environment that supports the most hard to reach?

What kinds of materials have been successful with these students? Have you found collaborative learning, student-centered curriculum, or inquiry-based projects to be effective? What teacher attitudes and behaviors seem most conducive to involving the uninvolved? We invite manuscripts that explore any aspect of this complex issue. Narratives and poems are also welcome on how you learned to teach the hard to reach.

Deadline: November 15, 1996.

Literature Alive!

Most of us in the field of language arts can remember the special teachers who fostered our love for literature. These teachers were not only responsible for making us lifelong readers, but also were a force in guiding us toward teaching as a career. In these classrooms we learned that our lives and the experiences we brought to the text were as important as the text itself. Unfortunately, too many students in our state find themselves in classrooms where literature classes are reduced to covering sections of a text book or basal.

What activities do you use to engage your students? How have you been able to deal with curriculum requirements of your school and still bring the students’ lives and interests into the classroom? Have you had success with literature circles, book clubs, collaborative groups, or other types of student-led discussion groups? What activities do you use to take students beyond the text? Do you use reader’s theater or other performance-based extensions? Do you have activities for a particular piece of literature you could share?

For this issue we are interested in article-length manuscripts that describe the teaching of literature in your classroom, as well as shorter pieces about successful strategies or activities.

Deadline: May 15, 1997

Whole Language: Dead or Alive?

Many of us who consider ourselves whole language teachers can remember the events which led us from our more traditional beginnings to the whole language philosophy. Others of us have always been whole language teachers, espousing the principles long before they had a name. There was a time when teachers were not afraid of the whole language label. Now, many of us feel compelled to mask the fact to wary administrators or an ill-informed public.

As the political climate has changed, as *Hooked on Phonics* has replaced *Hooked on Books*, what can responsible whole language teachers do?

For this issue we welcome manuscripts about many topics and in many forms. What do we mean when we say whole language? What questions do you have about whole language? Is whole language alive in your district? What does your whole language classroom look like? What makes the whole language approach different from other approaches? How does the whole language theory translate into classroom practices? What are the advantages or the disadvantages of whole language? Can you tell a classroom story that describes the power of whole language or problems with it? How can it help individual students?

In what ways have you communicated to parents or administrators about the power of whole language?

Deadline: November 15, 1997

Length: Four to twelve pages in MLA format (please include two copies)

Submit to: **Language Arts Journal of Michigan**, The Editors, The Writing Center,
300 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824

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