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Orchestrating a Young Authors' Conference

John Cass is a retired teacher and former language arts coordinator K-12 for the Pontiac Schools. He is active in the Michigan Reading Association and Oakland County Reading Council and is editor of OCRC Matters.

The Young Authors' Conference is a day (week, weekend) set aside to promote the written creations of young authors. The connection between reading and writing has long been noted and researched. The Michigan Reading Association has long recognized this bond by encouraging students to write by publishing the works of the top writers in each school in their literary magazine, *Kaleidoscope*. The idea behind the YAC is to bring students together to meet a *real author and/or illustrator*, watch and listen as the author/illustrator creates a book, share their own writings with other students their own age, and gain confidence and strategies for writing future masterpieces.

Preparation

To prepare for our Young Authors' Conference, the Oakland County Reading Council appointed co-chairs Ellen Davis, a principal from Grandview Elementary, Clarenceville, and Marie Thomas, a fifth-grade teacher from Detroit Country Day School, Bloomfield Hills. Almost a year in advance of the date, we brainstormed the details of the conference:

- A. Setting a date and facilities for the event.
- B. Enlisting the services of an author/illustrator
- C. Recruiting team leaders and facilitators from the organization
- D. Exploring funding

A. We wanted a facility that would not associate itself with the everyday school-life of the child, although many districts have their YACs in middle schools or high schools. Since we were targeting children in grades 3-5, we thought they would be impressed and stirred to creativity by having our conference at Oakland University. We were right. We set our limit at 120 students and had to cut off enrollment at 140 because of the restrictions of space and personnel. OU had the rooms we needed for breakout sessions and a larger room for a general meeting for all. They were also able to accommodate the parents and chaperones in their "Fireside Lounge" where the adults waited in comfortable surroundings with provided coffee, rolls, and a book vendor selling children's books. The previous year's YAC had taught us that if you have nothing planned for the adults, they crowd the children's sessions.

B. We checked with the MRA office for the addresses of potential authors. Several of the council members had heard, attended sessions at the MRA Annual Conference, and recommended Wendy Anderson Halperin and John Mooy. According to the reports, there was a wonderful session where John told a story of his childhood escapades while Wendy drew illustrations to fit the context. The combination seemed perfect to show students how a book is created.

C. We then planned the nuts and bolts of the conference: recruiting members from the council to handle the breakout sessions, planning the activities and materials for the morning, decid-

ing on refreshments, working on a timetable for the event, selecting a book vendor, designing an attractive flyer, and arranging the event with the staff of Oakland University Center.

D. OCRC (Oakland County Reading Council) received a grant from the MRA for this Young Authors' Conference. The council also decided to charge each person a small fee to cover the cost of the refreshments. In addition, we received a generous stipend from the McGraw Hill Publishing Company.

Publicity

The key to any program or event, such as this one, is in getting the word out to the schools and the children. Co-chair Ellen Davis designed the flier, which was sent to every school in Oakland County, public and private. We used the ISD (Oakland Schools) for distribution and mailing. The flier had a registration tear-off sheet, address for return mailing, and necessary information including a raffle of books from the vendor, as well as some of Wendy and John's books. Information was also included in our newsletter, *OCRC Matters*, with pertinent information and another chance for schools to register their students for the conference. The number of students, up to 6 from each school, was set arbitrarily in order to give the students some familiarity with their own classmates and yet let them meet other children from other schools in the county. Notice also the caveat given to the parents, teachers, and chaperones about convening in the lounge area for coffee.

Pre-planning and Set-up

Before the conference the council met at our regular monthly meeting and spent some time preparing small (6x8) spiral bound notebooks for each child to keep a journal. We also gathered materials for them to create bookmarks—crayons, markers, construction paper, stickers, etc. Notification was also sent to each registered school with a map and schedule for the half day (9:00 a.m.–noon). School teams were also requested to have students bring their best work and to discourage short haiku-type poems that didn't leave much

room for discussion. Team leaders were identified for the small and larger group sessions. Colored-coded nametags were cut for each student. Final arrangements were made with the OU Center and their catering staff.

The Big Day: Young Authors' Conference

As each group arrived they were given *colored-coded nametags* to fill out with their name, school, and city. Each student was also given a raffle ticket for later. They were then ushered into a larger room for juice, milk, and donuts. The students were welcomed by the co-chairs and introduced to the schedule for the morning. Depending on their nametag's color, the students were then sent to one of three rooms for the first session. Each session was organized to last 40 minutes:

Children Sharing In these rooms the children were divided into groups of 6–8 and asked to share their creations with the other children. As each student read, he or she was asked to refer to the "Points for Discussion" to establish some uniformity to the readings. Team leaders from the council facilitated the discussion and kept it moving. If time remained after all had read their selections, we talked about submitting their work to *Kaleidoscope*.

Writing Journal/Bookmarks In this room the students were given a chance to create their own bookmarks with the materials available. Some of the children made elaborate concoctions with beads, old jewelry, sequins, and feathers in assorted colors. When finished with their bookmarks, they were asked to write about their experience in their "journals" or notebooks, which were provided for each child. Note: The first year of the YAC, the students made their own notebooks by folding and cutting construction paper forming their books.

Author's Sharing In these rooms the children were introduced to the author and illustrator. John Mooy told a story from his childhood (going on the mail delivery route with his fa-

ther), while Wendy drew illustrations for the story. Each story had its own flavor and illustration.

Drawing in the Gold Room

For the last half-hour, the students reconvened in the Gold Room for a concluding activity by Wendy and John and the raffle of books and pictures. Wendy showed all the students how to draw a teacup. Some of their

"masterpieces" were magnificent with colors, shading, and 3-D effects. We then raffled the books provided by the book distributors and John and Wendy. Wendy's creations were also a hit at the raffle.

The students were dismissed promptly at noon —some carrying their prize posters and books, all with their journals, bookmarks, written creations, and a lot of smiles. Many stayed to buy books displayed in the lounge.

Michigan Reading Association Membership Application

Check all that apply:

- ☐ Teacher
☐ Administrator
☐ Title I
☐ Paraprofessional
☐ Adult Education
☐ Elementary
☐ Middle
☐ Secondary
☐ University
☐ Other _____

Payment:

- ☐ Regular Member \$30.00
☐ Full Time Undergraduate Student ... \$10.00
☐ Parent/Non-Educator \$10.00

Method of Payment:

- ☐ Check ☐ MasterCard ☐ VISA

Card Account Number:

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Expiration Date:

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Your home address determines your voting region:

Name: _____

Home Address: _____

City, State: _____

County: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

I am a member of (please circle):

International Reading Association Yes No

Local Reading Council Yes No

Signature (Required on all credit card applications)

Local Council Name

Sorry NO PURCHASE ORDERS - prepaid orders only. Thank you.

Please remit form with payment to: MRA, 668 Three Mile Road NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49544

Call for Manuscripts

Fall, 2003: Children's and young adult books in the classroom: Are we creating a new canon?

(Manuscripts must be received by April 1, 2003. Electronic submissions are encouraged.)

Long before basal readers became the preferred classroom literacy tool, reading teachers used authentic texts—the bible, novels, newspapers, magazines, story books—to teach children their letters. Within a short period of time, a relatively few authors—often “dead white men”—and their narratives had become institutionalized. Eventually these poems, short stories, and excerpts from longer narratives were conveniently collected in anthologies.

Recently, critics have objected to the literary “canon,” raising multiple issues: the role of people of color and women as authors, illustrators, and characters; diverse interpretations instead of only a Euro-American viewpoint; alternative “readings” of text, such as economic, feminist, deconstructionist, etc.

Is there a canon of approved texts that we rely on in our elementary and secondary classrooms today? Why have these books been “canonized”? What is the rationale behind books that are “reserved” by administrators for specific grade levels? Have you ever attempted to buck the system and read new books with your students? What was the result? Did you ever share a book that had been reserved for another grade level?

What impact does this have on our children's thinking? Historically, what are some specific examples of children's books becoming institutionalized—and what are the effects of this? (Think about *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, or even *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein.) What made these books achieve such fame? In what way does the institutionalization of a few books benefit or detract from children's/young adult literature as a whole? What are the drawbacks for you as a teacher? What implications does this phenomenon have for the future of children's book publishing—textbooks and trade books?

We invite manuscripts that explore the pros and cons of the idea that a canon of children's books exists in our classrooms. Contributions are welcomed from children's book authors and illustrators as well as librarians, classroom educators, publishers, editors, translators, scholars, and critics.

- Manuscripts should not exceed 2,500-3,000 words.
- Author's name, mailing address, telephone number, FAX number, e-mail address, and professional affiliation should be on a separate cover page. The author's name should not appear in the manuscript.
- Three members of the editorial review board will review all manuscripts.
- Manuscripts must be received by April 1, 2003. Decisions will be reached usually within four months of submission.
- If a manuscript is accepted for publication, its author must provide a computer disk copy of the manuscript, preferably in MS Word.
- Charts, graphs, drawings, and high quality photographs pertaining to article topics will be appreciated. Photographs from a digital camera can be submitted digitally.
- Send six copies of the manuscript and two self-addressed, stamped envelopes to:

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