Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 28
Issue 2 *Exploration and Stories*

Article 3

5-2013

Go Forth and Do Good

Nancy Patterson
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Patterson, Nancy (2013) "Go Forth and Do Good," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1952>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

EDITORIAL

Go Forth and Do Good

NANCY PATTERSON, LAJM EDITOR

It was New Year's Eve and a friend and I had decided to take the train to Toronto to help bring in 1974. I'd saved a little bit of my \$100 a week salary, packed my best polyester pant suit, and sported my new dark-rimmed aviator glasses. My friend and I went from one club to another and after the new year arrived, we made our way back to our hotel, where we found two intoxicated men starting to shove each other.

I have no idea why I decided to stand between them.

"You," I said to one. "Start walking in that direction." I pointed to my right.

"You," I said to the other. "Go that way," I pointed in the opposite direction

"But he's with my party," one of them whined.

"That way," I said again, my arm extended and my finger pointing down a still busy street full of revelers. "Now."

And they both meekly did what I told them to do.

A man who had watched the incident stopped me and said, "That was amazing!"

"I'm a born teacher," I told him.

I wasn't, though. In fact, I'm not sure anyone is a "born teacher." That suggests teaching happens through some genetic encoding rather than deep thinking and significant learning.

When I graduated from college the spring before this incident, I was one of thousands of other newly minted teachers trying to find jobs. And I was one of the one who didn't find a teaching position. Instead, I was working as a secretary in an insurance agency.

I was young. I was naïve. And I had no idea what was in store for me just a few weeks after the Toronto incident. It was through the insurance office grapevine that I learned the receptionist and her husband, an English and journalism teacher in a rural district west of Lansing, were returning to her home in Australia. A mid-year teaching position was available and I was certified in both English and journalism.

Only four people applied for the job, an astonishingly small number for the time. I was the only one who was certified to teach journalism.

And so I became a teacher.

I was terrible at it.

For one thing, my classroom was housed in a metal-sided building across a rutted and winter-slippery parking lot that separated it from the main building. I rarely saw other teachers. When I reported to the school on the first Monday of the second semester, I picked up my keys from the secretary in the office and was shown to my classroom. No one came out to check on me. No one showed me what books the students were using. There were no syllabi. No teacher's manuals. No handbook of procedures.

And, I had a head full of oatmeal.

For some stupid reason I thought the sheer power of my personality would be enough to turn my students on to learning in my classroom. I was so wrong. And it would take me at least five years before I sensed that I was making any sort of impact on my students' learning. It didn't help, of course, that for that first semester I was isolated from my colleagues in that horrible metal building that also housed the student auto shop. The next year, and for the next three years, I "traveled" from room to room where, if I were lucky, I was allotted a drawer in a desk and part of a bookshelf. So, I had no home, no nest to settle into. It wasn't until the district bought five dilapidated portable classrooms, long narrow trailers that sat atop concrete blocks, that I got a classroom of my own, one with sagging and water stained ceiling tiles and a linoleum floor that came apart in pieces as students shuffled to their seats.

I put desks in rows. I circled errors on papers. I gave spelling tests. I asked students to memorize such things as the 48 commonly used prepositions in alphabetical order. I made them read *Silas Marner* out of the 20-year-old literature book that I still had no manual for, and to take quizzes and tests over the chapters.

Oatmeal. Lumpy. Inconsistent. Tasteless. And not up to the nutritional needs of my students.

There were two things that helped me replace the oatmeal in my brain. One was a transfer from the district's high school to the middle school. After 14 and a half years as the publications adviser, I was tired. I'd fought lots of battles for my students over their press rights, the purpose of a school newspaper, and the content of the paper. We had won more than 50 awards, but every year I had to fight administrators who viewed the paper as a public relations tool rather than a learning experience for writers. When I was asked if I wanted to move to the middle school, I said yes. Yes! For one thing, I would have a large sunny room with a door that opened onto a hallway rather than a set of treated lumber steps and whatever weather happened to be passing through. But I also knew there was a good administrator at the middle school.

It was that administrator who made the difference for me. There was something about the culture of the teachers in that building that fostered or, perhaps, challenged me to think about what I did in the classroom and why I did it. My first year at the middle school, as I was walking out of the teachers' lounge after lunch, I said to no one in particular, "Now I get to go teach eighth graders about nouns."

The math teacher in front of me stopped and turned around. "You're joking," she said in disgust. "You really need to know more about how to practice your profession, Nancy."

She was right. There in that doorway I received one of the greatest professional gifts I would ever get. Honesty. And a challenge to really think about what I was doing in the classroom and why I was doing it. Within two years of that brief exchange with a math teacher, I turned my classroom into a reading and writing workshop.

But one other thing happened that had a profound affect on me as a teacher. It was another gift, this time from a wise principal.

I had learned about writing and reading workshop during a week-long professional development experience in Traverse City. My district sent me to learn as much as I could about teaching writing and then come back and teach it to others. The experience itself was powerful, so powerful that I knew I needed to change everything I did as a teacher. So, I wrote an eight-page rationale for my principal. I made my appointment and sat in his office prepared to make my case. I didn't even get through the points I made in the first paragraph.

He stopped me and said, "Nancy, I trust you. Go ahead and do this. You don't need my permission; you're the expert."

You're the expert. Those words were transformative. One month later on the first day of the school year my students entered a literacy workshop.

And it was terrible. But my principal kept encouraging me. "Don't worry," he said. "You're just figuring things out. Don't give up. I support you."

I confess I never really did figure things out, but I don't think anyone does. Each year I modified the workshop, shaped the arc of the school year differently, added new focused lessons, tried and then abandoned rubrics, and rolled with the needs individual students brought to my classroom. I added books to my classroom library. I joined NCTE and tapped into their wealth of information.

And I went to grad school.

It is odd, after all, that I went into teaching in the first place. I hated school as a kid and from fourth grade on I weaseled out of just about every homework assignment I'd ever been given. My father was a professor and my mother was a psychologist. They did school very well and were beside themselves over this smart little girl who was perfectly content to get C's and even D's. I graduated from high school with a 2.23 GPA, went off to college as a voice major, and managed to flunk out by the end of my sophomore year. After making up credits at the local community college, I transferred to Michigan State and finished my degree in English. But I swore I would only take enough graduate classes to keep my certification. I had no interest in getting a masters degree.

But the sharp comment from the math teacher and the support from my principal made me, for the first time in my life, want more schooling. I started a masters program for the best of all reasons. I just wanted to know more. And from there I couldn't stop. I yearned for conversations about teaching, about what it meant to be literate and the nature of literacy itself. I learned about Maxine Greene and what she meant by "wide-awake teaching." I learned about hegemony and the often unacknowledged gate-keeping practices that year after year keep certain populations of students from real achievement. I learned about dialects and languages of power, about the power of narrative and why we need to keep stories at the center of our teaching, about writing processes and classroom environments. I read Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, Audre Lorde, Kenneth Goodman, George Landow, Benedict Anderson, Mev Puleo, Paulo Freire, Nancie Atwell,

Tom Romano, Patrick Shannon. I don't want to stop listing the names of people who have become so much a part of my teaching self over the past 15 years.

I will soon enter my 40th year as a teacher and this is my final issue as co-editor of *LAJM*. Even so, I find myself anticipating the next semester, the next conference, the next conversation about teaching and learning. And I dream about the future of the profession I have come to love so deeply.

I know that the current misguided attempts to reform education will fail. I don't know what will happen between now and the realization that these reforms cannot work, but I sense the shift happening. The national movement that is encouraging parents to opt their children out of standardized testing is evidence that the shift is beginning to take place. We can make that shift happen faster, but only if we practice the critical thinking that we claim we want our students to use.

Teaching is a messy business. There are no quick fixes or clever gimmicks that can tidy us up. If we want our students to write well, then we have to provide them time, opportunity, and guidance as they write. No expensive program or formulaic gimmick will ease us out of the work we have to do in order to help our students develop the habits of mind that will allow them to engage in their own meaning-making processes. If we want them to be literate human beings who engage in all kinds of texts, we have to get our noses out of someone else's notion of what good teaching is and back into the business of bringing students to the literacy table. That can only happen when students are immersed in an environment that is filled with real texts.

Literacy isn't about passing a 10 question multiple-choice quiz or reading at a particular level. It isn't about the number of nonsense syllables a child can read in 60 seconds or the oral reading "mistakes" that child makes. It isn't about measuring the number of words a child knows or prosody or fluency. It is about developing a relationship with texts and the worlds that live through those texts and in the hearts of readers. Literacy is about transformation. If our students do not experience that transformation on a daily basis, then we as individuals and as a profession are failing.

If we do not stand up as individuals and as a profession and say that Pearson, McGraw Hill, Bill Gates, and whoever else is trying to grab a piece of the classroom pie, these people should not be making curricular and instructional decisions. And when we allow them to make these decisions and usurp our role, we are committing educational malpractice.

Education is about finding a voice. We as educated professionals need to challenge ourselves—constantly—about the assumptions we make about learning and teaching and we need to find and use our collective voices.

Human beings love to learn. Our students love to learn. If they do not love to learn in our classrooms, then something is amiss. When we focus more on data than on learning, we fail to meet the needs of our students and we undermine their love of learning. When we believe data rather than our own teacher smarts, we abdicate our own responsibility as educators. And when we defer to the whims of whatever educational reform movement that is in vogue at the moment, we lose our "selves" as teachers.

And so, in this farewell as *LAJM* co-editor, I challenge each person reading this to keep these questions close to your heart.

What does it mean to be literate?

What do I need to do in my classroom to enable literacy to happen?

What do I need to know in order to recognize in my heart and in my mind that literacy is taking place in my classroom?

What questions do I need to ask myself about my role as a teacher and a literate partner to my students in my classroom?

I ask myself these questions all the time, even as a teacher educator. I don't have the answers, but in my search for the answers I come closer to my own heart as a teacher.

I'm a teacher, not because I could break up a fight on a long ago New Year's Eve in Toronto, but because I can constantly ask myself those questions. And I say to you what I frequently say to my students.

Have courage.

Stand up for what is right.

Go forth and do good work.

Editor's Note: This marks the last issue that **Nancy Patterson** serves as co-editor of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. The Michigan Council of Teachers of English thanks Nancy and her colleagues Nancy DeFrance (co-editor, 2010-2011), Elizabeth Stolle (co-editor, 2010-2012), and Mary Fahrenbruck (co-editor, 2011) for their contributions to this publication.