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The Benefits of Clubs: Constructing Our Own Traditions



EDITORIAL BY **ROBERT L. SMITH**

Growing up with three brothers and two sisters was like having a constant club wherever I went. Second oldest, I was one of the first to be allowed to play in the unused hut between Grandpa and Grandma's house and Mom and Dad's. It sat back far enough away to give us the feeling of being independent even though the adults could easily keep an eye on us. With an old swing attached to a huge walnut tree out front and two rooms inside that no one ever worried about, the old hut was a great place to establish our club. Once the clubhouse was claimed and the club began holding its meetings, all kinds of benefits followed. Uncle Harry brought his lawn mower over and cut a diamond shape in the weeds so that we could play baseball. Any hit that made it through the infield had a good chance of becoming a home run once it disappeared in the wild carrots and milk weed. One summer evening Uncle Harry burned one of his railroad flares on the pitcher's mound for us club members.

But the best part of being in the club was not what others did for us but what we did for ourselves. The best part was inventing the club's activities with the other members. Some days we would decide to go for hikes down by the river; other days we would read comics, play school, create imaginary adventures, or hunt for snakes or rabbits. As we negotiated what each day's activities would be, we simultaneously constructed traditions because good activities (like making a haunted hut, selling wild strawberries and worms) were bound to be repeated, and bad ones (like knocking

down hornet nests and cracking thin ice) would be discarded.

I will admit to being a vagabond who has joined quite a few clubs throughout the years. Perhaps it was my childhood club memories that caused me to seek out extracurricular associations once I became established in my profession. I consider MRA my favorite club these days; even though we don't sell worms, some of the members have been known to turn a somersault or two at the annual dance or to grease back their hair and put on motorcycle jackets.

Because of layoffs and other turning points, I have taught and worked in many educational settings in a variety of Michigan counties. Wherever I have moved, I have found a reading council nearby. MRA and its local reading councils have provided a sense of continuity for me. I did not join the **Kent Reading Council** when I started teaching at Grandville High School in 1977, for I did not yet realize that secondary English teachers needed to teach reading. In 1979-80, I found myself in another high school, and it was then I joined my first reading council — the **Monroe County Reading Council**. I began working on a master's degree at the University of Michigan and was busy trying to figure out how to help secondary students develop good attitudes toward printed materials.

When I moved back to the west side of the state, I became closely involved with the **Homer Carter Reading Council** in Kalamazoo. This group of reading teachers elected me member-at-large and then treasurer of their club. I

later moved north but joined the **Oakland County Reading Council** in the east. During those years, I would drive across the entire state to hear the wonderful speakers — like Yetta Goodman (with whom I got to do the bunny hop at one club meeting) — that my council sponsored. About that time I began to feel the draw of MRA's special interest councils and I established dual membership many years ... the **Michigan Secondary Reading Interest Council** provided me many ideas and friends. Likewise the **Michigan Council of Adult Learners** helped me moonlight in the community colleges. I am proud that the frequently-honored **Western Dunes Council** made me an honorary member when I spoke there a few years ago.

Today, I am President-elect of the **Tri-County Reading Council** in the southwestern corner of the state. Now, that is quite a few local reading councils which I have joined over the years to augment my membership in MRA and IRA. This chronicle may seem ludicrous to some people. Why join so many clubs?

However, as I look around, I am not alone: teachers are joining all kinds of clubs — some formal and some informal. Probably these memberships result because teaching is such a complex profession. Even if a teacher doesn't slide from community to community and from level to level as I did, there is plenty of complexity in merely adapting to the changing generations, evolving cultures, teetering state department mandates, advancing academia, and the volatile world at large. Some of the creative social arrangements that I am aware of include the following.

- A group of Holt High School teachers meet once a month at each others' homes to write together. They are trying to publish professional articles that leave a legacy so that

other teachers do not need to start from scratch.

- A group of teachers meet periodically at the Red Cedar Writing Project at MSU to assist each other with independent research projects involving classroom situations. They use the book *Inquiry in the Classroom* as a guide to action research.
- A group of St. Joseph professionals choose and buy twenty-four books together — fiction and nonfiction. Each month two new books show up at their houses as they circulate the books. At the end of the year, the books are divvied up.
- A group of commuters from various parts of the state pool their resources to purchase professional tapes. They take turns listening to new curricular ideas. Even some journals such as *Educational Leadership* are available monthly on tape at a nominal cost.

These personal clubs are special.

They create intimacy between teachers that is important to professional development. And while educators may have a professional responsibility to learn whatever they can from their districts' staff development plan, they also are wise to take responsibility for their own professional development. Clubs and professional organizations help us tailor experiences that lead toward our goals and enable us to reflect and set new goals for ourselves.

But even that is not enough. As Susan Florio-Ruane argues in this issue, teachers must also take responsibility for the way the world views education. Banding together to speak our minds and construct new ideas can help us prepare to articulate our views — orally or in writing — to outsiders. That is where MRA can provide an extra boost, and the *MRIJ* is one key vehicle for educators to construct their thoughts and traditions.

Frank Smith, with whom I have never bunny-hopped or hunted rabbits, has spoken of literacy clubs and has wanted teachers to find ways of welcoming others into the special society. Wherever we are, we create our own traditions and then constantly renegotiate them in a social manner. *MRJ* is an emblem of MRA's belief that when teachers and instructors think and play together linguistically with club-like abandon, the students will benefit as much as we do.

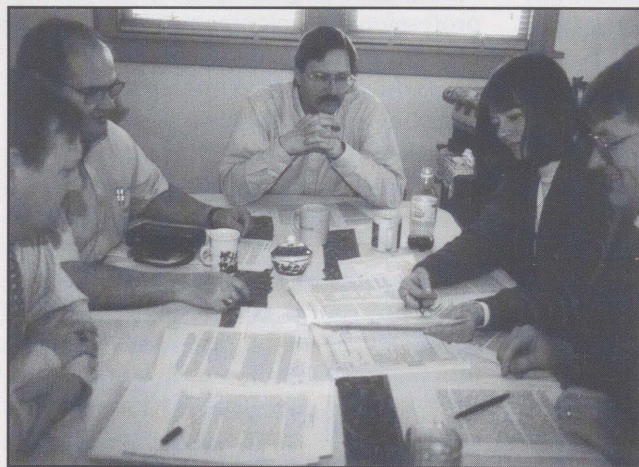


I want to honor three groups that help to make *MRJ* so significant. The first group has never assembled in one room but has nevertheless worked together to review in a consistent manner the submissions to *MRJ*. The **Editorial Review Board** members who are listed on the inside cover have committed three years now to MRA's endeavor, and this work has helped many writers improve their ideas and formats. The tradition these reviewers have created is a laudable one.

The second group is known as the **MRJ Advisory Board**. These activists have met — during summers and weekends — to talk over the issues that

emerge whenever you do something as political as publishing important ideas. I congratulate **Pauline Coleman, Mark Conley, Klo Phillippi, Cathleen Rafferty, and Marlene (Bruno) Smith** for three years of volunteer service in maintaining the excellent traditions that we inherited while also working to improve them. As our three-year term draws to a close, we feel exhilarated rather than tired because of the third group's responses to our call for help.

In fact, the final group is the one that shows that *both* of the other two groups' hard work paid off. The number of teachers and instructors submitting articles or artwork to the journal is fantastic. The thickness of this issue could have been doubled had we used all of the pieces that are approved and ready to print. I thank all who have contributed and all who are planning to submit to the journal. I believe one of the best ways to help our profession grow stronger is to continue encouraging all types of educators to share written ideas with each other. We all can play a part in that encouragement (see the back cover for details) whenever we observe someone employing a good teaching practice or expressing a new idea.



This editorial was reviewed by the Teachers' Writing Club of Holt High School: Mike Lehman, Jerry Gillett, Bruce Kutney, Mary Gray and Larry Burgess.