MICHIGAN AS A CONTENT AREA FOR WRITING

Ann Ransford

At the 1989 Traverse Bay Writers' Workshop, I studied Reading and Writing about Michigan with Stephen Tchudi's class. We wrote and read in the morning and traveled in the afternoon to the Northport Lighthouse, the Sleeping Bear Dunes Lifesaving Station, and the Leelanau and Traverse City museums. Michigan was the common class theme as we shared logging tales, shipwreck stories, Michigan geography, excerpts from Michigan authors and more—all found in Tchudi's portable reading collection called the "Michigan Box." We made personal connections to Michigan history by finding subjects that called for personal investments to pull us into the material. Then we published a class magazine to have "writing-to-learn" at its best: a Tchudi writing model, the beautiful Traverse Bay in summer, and a class of English teachers all speaking in tongues, drawn together by the power of our own writing.

Reflecting on this experience and oftentimes dissatisfied with generic writings in my tenth and twelfth grade classes, I began to ask: Why couldn't Michigan focus take place in my secondary classroom? I answered this question by returning to school the next fall to make changes inspired by Tchudi's words, "I've taught a course in Reading and Writing about Michigan based on the premise that one can create a full and engaging language arts curriculum using Michigan literature and community concerns" (76).

Drawing from this premise, my English classes ventured upon a yearlong writing study with Michigan as the content area. Michigan knowledge became the common ground from which students could travel in their own directions. We explored Michigan's history, debated its current problems, and investigated its future solutions. For example, students could be reading about Indian canoes, Michigan authors, crime, lighthouses, or wildlife; and, concurrently, they could be writing reports, letters, poems, or
dialogues. Although Michigan content was a common stimulus, all were responsible for their own subjects and structures. All had the freedom to find and follow their own interests, making it a year of risk when I didn't have all the answers and didn't have the control of a uniform class assignment. It was also a year of mutual growth as we discovered together the richness of Michigan as a content area. It was exciting to teach new material and to learn from my students' writing while joining them as part of a community of Michigan researchers.

The following is a panoramic view of my experience with Michigan as a content area for writing. Working within the confines of curriculum in each class level, Michigan became the unifying principle, as it brought the information home and became the basis for personal writing, literature study, and research. It provided endless learning opportunities for students as they developed personal connections to learn more about themselves and environment.

We began the study by reading a short story, “Where the World Began,” by Margaret Laurence. An excerpt follows:

A strange place it was, that place where the world began. A place of incredible happenings, splendors, and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells.... This is where my world began. A world which includes the ancestors—both my own and other people's ancestors who become mine. A world which formed me, and continues to do so, even while I found it in some of its aspects, and continue to do so. A world which gave me my own lifework to do, because it was here that I learned the sight of my own particular eyes. 

Laurence captures the discovery of self and community and world, the emerging philosophy of personal connections behind Michigan as a content area for writing. Discovering who we are, starting with personal interests and then reaching out for more connections with the Michigan environment, gave students an identity, a point of departure for evaluation, a first person point of view, and a deeper sense of self in a Michigan setting.
Like ripples from a pebble thrown into a quiet pond, students began with personal knowledge, a personal investment to encircle what they knew, and then they moved beyond to what they needed to find out. Anchored in Michigan subject matter, students were encouraged to grow from personal connections to community investigations and community contributions through writing. Thus, placing students in the center of their own learning and reinforcing this position with first-hand Michigan experiences forged the chemistry for writing.

We began our writing with personal inventories, listing Michigan memories and experiences such as roadside parks and picnics with grandparents, beach fires, making maple syrup, crystal cold air at football games, or the sway of the Mackinaw Bridge. With a foothold into the work, students expanded these lists as a means of self-discovery, and they wrote daily sketches responding to ideas, readings, discussions, field trips, plans, dreams, events, and more, as a means of self-expression. They were building and collecting the center of their own learning. By beginning with familiar experiences to initiate wider Michigan materials, they were forming personal histories that led into new areas of interest.

The result was some original and energetic writings, such as Indian petroglyphic rock interpretations and diaries, a collection of a grandfather’s poetry with interpretations by a grandson, personality sketches from family trees, illustrated family histories, science fiction introductions to our town, court reporting from a Tuscola County Court House trial, short stories based on Michigan ghost towns or Great Lakes shipwrecks, travel logs following the shoreline, and poetic weather descriptions.

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, an early Michigan explorer, “Happy are those who can tie together in their thoughts the past, the present, and the future.” In the spirit of de Tocqueville, my students often engaged in quests to find out where we Michiganders have been, where we are, and where we are going. When at the Michigan Historical Museum, students wrote postcard impressions based on these three dimensions and prompted by a similar Tchudi assignment from his “Museums and More” class. For example, an Indian fishing spear found in the museum representing the past elicited comments on today’s fishing methods and speculations about how we might catch fish in the future with lasers. Some students made observations contrasting the pure and beautiful environment of the past with contemporary pollution, which in turn spurred forecasts about wearing masks and
selling fresh air in the next century. To complete this assignment, students combined details from research and imagination to link the past, present, and future.

This focus on the past, the present, and the future was especially strong when we studied Michigan agriculture. Our community sits on rich soil of sugar beet country with strong connections to a heritage of land and family farms. We studied the family farm's past, charted changes, sought to understand the farm situation today, and speculated about the future of farming in Michigan. We traced the family farm through its diversity, self-sufficiency, and independence to its dependence and specialization as the farmer moved from being a man of the soil to becoming a businessman with a computer. Our writing activities for this unit built on the dimensions of past, present, and future. For example:

Life and death happened on the farm; children were born upstairs in the bedroom and caskets were displayed in the parlor. Contrast this with today's methods of birth and death. What has been lost? Gained?
Write chapters by generations in one farm house to discover different points of view in different times.
Role play a politician in different eras and write speeches that would appeal to the farmer.
Write ads for a hired hand during different periods of Michigan development.
Write the criteria for choosing a mate on an 1800's farm and contrast that with your criteria for a mate today.

Writing prompts such as these focused students on the agricultural lifestyle that surrounded them, helping them see the world from a farmer's point of view as they learned his concerns, stresses, and responsibilities. As a wall writing found in the MSU Heritage Room in Kellogg Center claims, "Our heritage...molds the perceptions we have of ourselves and the reality around us." Accordingly, this three-dimensional study deepened our place in time, giving to students a sense of continuance and connection as they stood in the present holding hands with the past and the future.

With research a way of life, the classroom became a library of Michigan books, magazines, and free handouts. Students were encouraged to bring Michigan materials from home. Classroom procedures resulted in museum
building as we collected artifacts, Michigan photos, family anecdotes, and posters. Several faculty members who collect antiques were invaluable sources. Show and tell was the order of the day. We invited community speakers, such as a retired history teacher who shared local lore, and we listened to the village manager reminisce about yesterday and today at the Watrousville Historical Society. We read articles by our superintendent on school history and saw a slide show of David Trotter's shipwreck underwater photography.

In this spirit, my classes formed a community of writers as we shared and collected together and benefitted from each other's ideas, projects, and artifacts. For example, all students brought in Michigan photos and wrote captions to decorate the room. And all students pinned a favorite spot on a Michigan map and then contacted the Chamber of Commerce in the area to collect information and write travelogues. The travelogue folders were available to all students in the school and their families to check out as travel guides. In this way, the classroom became the center for learning with tenth and twelfth grades participating across class levels.

I often began classes by sharing my Michigan reading and writing, and I encouraged students to do the same so that we built together on what we knew. I came across a local author, Dee Smith, and invited her to speak to classes about her book, *Trek into the Past: Historical Sketches of Michigan's Thumb*. This gave the students a chance not only to meet a living, breathing writer, but also to hear her explain her writing processes and research procedures for her book. As I read Dee's book aloud, students took notes and then experimented with different genres, using their notebooks much like an artist uses a sketch pad. After learning about the fire of 1881, a student made these entries. Note the variety of subjects and styles:

In the summer of 1881 some farmers were burning piles of slashings left by the lumbermen. They were warned not to do this by several papers because it was so hot and dry. Over one half of the Thumb was destroyed.

Dear God,

Our farm completely burned to the ground, but we survived and hugged each other while our faces were soaked with tears. We were alive. Thank you very much.
Just terrible! All the smoke and heat and flames. I dread hearing the sound of roaring and screaming horses and wind.

Burning flame
Scorching the flesh raw like a human hamburger
Animals running like a house on fire
Protect them
Lake water begins to boil
The end of the world has arrived.

We also traveled as much as possible. We reached out to experience new information and then returned to internalize the knowledge through writing. We went on field trips to the Lansing Historical Museum (where we learned more about lumbering and mining), the Henry Ford Museum (where we concentrated on the agricultural exhibit and the working and development of machinery), Greenfield Village and the Firestone Farm (where we sat in the fields and imagined life on an 1800's farm), the Tuscola County Court House (where we observed jury selection and students became court reporters), the Schuck Hotel in Saginaw, a favorite haunt of Theodore Roethke (where we read and responded to his poetry), and, under a harvest moon, the Sanilac Petroglyph State Park (where we studied a sandstone rock mysteriously inscribed from an ancient Indian culture).

A student helped make the arrangements for our petroglyph trip. In preparation, students reported on Michigan Indians and we invited Mark Kellor, an Indian historian, to speak to our class. Afterwards, we took over the Cass City Hardee's to write about our experiences while ideas were fresh and clear. Several students wrote letters to Governor Engler, expressing concern about funding cuts which jeopardized the preservation of the park and nature trail; others wrote historical fiction and impressions; one student captured the spirit of the place in poetry.

Writing grows from first-hand experiences such as these. Through our travelling experiences the power of place and the power of writing combined to make an electric contact. "You have to be there" because "being there" brings knowledge into focus, while writing makes the connection and grounds the writing experience.

Students also took family trips around the state. Sometimes students walked downtown to see the stained glass window of General Cass signing a
treaty with the Indians in the Tuscola County Court House or the oil mural in the post office painted by a traveling artist, David Fridenthal, sponsored by the CCC program, or they drove to historical markers and centennial farms. We were often not aware that such local treasures existed, and our discoveries brought to our writing a sharper sense of who we are (identity) and what we have (local pride). In the words of a student referring to the petroglyphic rock: "After walking the mile trail, I got to thinking. It seems nobody really knows about what is really here. I know I didn't, and I only live less than twenty miles from the darn thing."

However, our ultimate field trip was a field trip exam. To culminate a year of studying Michigan, we loaded school buses with three tenth-grade classes and headed a few miles out of town to the Watrous Spring Historical Museum and Civil War Cemetery. This exam began as a "writing-to-learn" experience as students wrote on site, making personal discoveries from the factual material. They then moved beyond their notes and synthesized the material into more polished forms. Some polished their notes into reports, some wrote thank-you letters to the people who conducted our tour, and some experienced life in Watrous Spring as time travelers and role players: shopping at the general store, playing football for the Watrous Spring School in 1916, and enjoying the first Tuscola County Fair in 1865. One student expressed the group's feelings: "The most unusual exam I've ever taken. Taking an exam somewhere out of school environment was definitely different. It relieved all the pressure of an exam. You could talk and walk around instead of being locked in a chair. You learned something different instead of taking all of the year's tests over again. I saw a lot of neat stuff... It was basically a laid back situation that made it easy to take in information."

As we studied literature back in the classroom, Michigan as the content area for writing opened new possibilities for collaborative interaction between classes and grade levels. Common writing assignments fostered models and comments. For example, Our Town by Thornton Wilder was read by the tenth grade and reread by the twelfth. Twelfth grade readers then commented on tenth grade reader-response journals. The tenth graders had twelfth grade models to read when both groups were assigned to write an introduction to a Michigan town based on the narrator's introduction to Grovers Corners:
Making connections to Michigan became a natural exercise in response to literature. When reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we related racial discrimination and affirmative action to Michigan; when we read the short story, "The Boar Hunt," we did some freewriting on what we knew about hunting in Michigan and then found out more by interviewing hunters (some right in class). We listened to Michigan Legacy Tapes by Mike Whorf to improve listening skills and became court reporters after reading the play *Twelve Angry Men*. *Our Town* was read while we studied agriculture and traced the disappearance of the American dream of inheriting the family farm. *Death of a Salesman*, another study in the loss of the American dream, promoted class discussions concerning the business climate in Michigan and family discussions concerning family philosophies: What ideas have been passed down in families? What ideas will students value to pass on to their children? Such threads were woven through curriculum requirements so that students could experience traditional works of literature in light of Michigan connections.

With Michigan as the main event, social and academic bonds formed within and between classes while they built and shared information. Tenth and twelfth graders took the same field trips, and it seemed to work out for almost everyone, except for a senior girl whose tenth grade brother was along. Students experienced together and then wrote together.

Another dimension of our Michigan study underscored the value of personal research within the community as a preparation for writing the research paper, the granddaddy of high school assignments. Our Michigan research moved students beyond their own knowledge and into the adult world of evidence. They began by collecting what they knew about a current subject and then reaching out to the community for what they needed to find out. The project had four aspects: (1) the paper was to be written on a current Michigan subject; (2) the paper was to have a traditional form but with an argumentative edge; (3) putting the paper together had to involve the writer in moving beyond the school into the community; and (4) some of the
information was to be presented in a production for the whole class so all could benefit from the research.

To make a writing project such as this significant, it is necessary to make a strong personal investment in the material by bringing it back home and peeling off the layers of national, state, and town to get down to family and self. For example, when writing about current Michigan concerns, the students began working with general subjects such as drinking and driving, education finance, and euthanasia, then limited their subjects to state and town and self before developing their essays. For one student, for example, "water pollution" became testing the water in the Saginaw Bay and finding out its contents at Caseville, a popular beach, as well as interviewing fellow swimmers and, finally, swimming in the water and providing a first-hand description of the experience. Similarly, a concern for quotas and discrimination in the workplace resulted in a student's interviewing businessmen on Main Street as well as high school faculty. A student promoting a condom vending machine on school grounds surveyed his senior class to find them high risks for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases according to national averages. Another student, discussing endangered wetlands, revealed that farmers destroy them in our own rural area with draining procedures.

I encouraged making personal connections to their material and put an emphasis on primary research. One student whose father works at General Motors' Bay City Chevrolet Assembly Plant focused on strong family connections in his paper on the trade deficit; a student whose mother works in a nursing home wrote about socialized medicine; and another student whose father is an administrator of a special education program in Pontiac wrote about inclusive education. This student was able to interview her father for primary research and quote him for secondary.

To further widen their audience for their research projects, students presented their papers for reading to authorities in the researched field. This accountability discouraged plagiarism, since it spotlighted information and subjected their reasoning to closer scrutiny. Sometimes positions were changed, such as in a paper on AIDS after the writer talked to the sex education teacher. Sometimes faulty information was discovered, such as in a paper on educational finance after the writer talked to the school's assistant superintendent. But most received positive feedback, as was the case with a science teacher's comments on a paper concerning the Great
Lakes Water Dilemma: "Kirk's scientific facts seem very accurate and in line with the materials I use for teaching the biology unit on the environment." Another paper on parental consent for abortions received this positive comment from a family planning worker at the health department: "Very interesting and well-written paper. I personally agree with many of your comments and find working with clients after abortions, that if they are teens, 75% have selected to include parents."

After the paper was completed, students began the production, which involved a deeper look into some interesting aspect of the paper and preparation for presentation to the class. The production emphasized independent study, encouraging additional reading as well as further developing of a point by finding more primary research in the community to make deeper local connections with material. This part of the project was designed to move writers beyond their papers and into the community. Students met with local law officials when writing about drug problems, polled shoppers in a parking lot when writing about seat belt safety, attended Alcoholics Anonymous and Alzheimer's meetings, observed special education classes, and interviewed social workers and welfare recipients. They connected with the community to test their research.

The grand finale of this assignment was the brief presentation to the class, another experience with the material. My advanced placement seniors enjoyed grilling the presenters, keeping everyone on his or her toes. Some students included charts and graphs; some created videos with computer pictures or video interviews. Presentations displayed and made public the research, further widening and testing and sharing the students' evidence and deepening its impact.

Last year another teacher, Kay Montel, and I began a Michigan Writing Contest in our area for grades Kindergarten through college. Writings were read by local authors and teacher volunteers and displayed in the Caro Indianfields Library during Michigan week. All who entered were winners and given recognition from McDonald's coupons; the Caro State Savings Bank gave ten-dollar checks for category winners, who were then published and made part of the local library collection. The goal of this project was to promote writing about Michigan and in so doing to provide a real writing experience with a wider community audience.
I'm now in my third year of teaching Michigan as a content area for writing, and the benefits of this method continue. The students are more responsible when they choose their own subjects and structures based on personal interests and insights from the Michigan materials. They can become librarians, museum curators, teachers, writers, speakers and listeners for a whole language experience. The students are more involved when personal connections are emphasized, when families and friends are included in the writing projects, and when trips are taken to write from firsthand impressions. The students also find positive feedback from the community, creating good personal relations as they take an interest in what is about them to become better informed citizens.

The richness of our state, so wealthy in areas of study, makes the possibilities endless. I'd like the students to contribute more to the community through writing by taking living histories, publishing more class anthologies, presenting for the elementary grades during Michigan Week, conducting an historical walking tour of our town, watching PBS programs such as the Michigan at Risk series, writing a grant to bring in speakers associated with Michigan, compiling a bibliography of Michigan books in our area libraries, organizing and summarizing documents for the historical society, and more, of course.

This approach is grounded on a foundation of common sense. Strong environmental connections place students in the center of their own learning. As they make discoveries about our town and state and note changes, they recognize that they themselves change and grow as well. Michigan as a content area for writing offers students opportunities to produce significant, meaningful results for themselves and their communities. It offers students opportunities to enjoy writing. And that's what it's all about.

Works Cited


Ann Ransford teaches at Caro High School and Delta College.