

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

Meadow Brook Musings

By John Callaghan

A few years back (I won't say how many), I tried to imagine what it would be like to retire, but I couldn't picture anything specific, as some do, such as world travel, tending to grandchildren, or playing multiple rounds of golf. I could imagine, though, that by the time I handed in my final grade book, the world of learning and teaching would be much different, if not much improved. I envisioned writing and reading workshops with students tapping away at their laptops or conducting electronic conferences with other writers their age; or reading a book they had downloaded from the internet and from time to time actually corresponding with a published author they admire; or even enjoying a video version of a short story they had just read or, better yet, creating a video version of that short story with peers. I would be wandering around the room accommodating all of these activities, responding to students' questions about a reading or writing assignment, about what author I would recommend they read next, or about what a particular passage in a story or poem meant; or I'd be up in the front of the room, using my Elmo to demonstrate mini-lessons for reading and writing workshops or showing students appropriate websites for research projects, and so forth.



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These past few months I've read much on the NCTE website, in the *English Journal*, and on the NWP website about 21st century literacies and multiple ways of providing tools to encourage students to tap into those literacies. Sad to say, I see little of that going on in my school district, and I dare say the same holds true for most other districts in our area and in our state. Money issues, of course, are a part of the problem, especially when it comes to providing the latest technologies for our students. Yet I can't remember a time these past 40+ years when there wasn't a dearth of funds to pay for our children's education. The issue goes much deeper than funding itself: Adequate Yearly Progress is almost entirely gauged on how our students perform on the Michigan Merit Exam. In other words, if our students don't perform well on the MME, the state can cut our funding and/or intervene in how we "execute" our curriculum. Needless to say, we teachers are under enormous pressure to teach to that test.

Many districts, mine included, are now "data-driven" which means we do an item analysis of which questions our students screwed up on the most (either on our semester "common assessments"- modeled of course on the MME-or on the big brother itself, last year's MME results) so that we can re-teach these "skills" so that our students will do better on this year's MME so that we can get AYP so that we can at least get a paltry sum from the state so that we can keep our district out of the public humiliation of the state taking us over or of the state cutting our funding so that... Well, I could go on, but I'm not into self-inflicted pain or breast beating any more (OK: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!) At any rate, not one of my colleagues is discussing 21st century literacies, opening up the curriculum to orchestrate such literacies, or what technologies we need for such literacies. They're discussing subject-verb agreement and how best to teach it, or how we can get our students to stop their sentences from running on, or where best to put the thesis statement in the five-paragraph theme or... Sound familiar?

Well, I got that off my chest, and I promise not to use any more "so that" constructions. After reading the following articles for this newsletter, I can tell you there is hope. Meadow Brook Writing Project TCs are resisting such teaching-to-the-test pressures, are conducting classroom research projects, are getting involved in a number of professional development events, and WRITING ABOUT IT! And not one of these articles is in a five-paragraph format! How about that! (OK, no more exclamation points, either). I hope you will take the time to read about WIDE PATHS (Writing in Digital Environments: Pedagogies and Theories), a conference at MSU that Rebecca Rivard ('08), Cornelia Pokrzywa ('08), and Shaun Moore ('09) attended in August and about the experience Laura Gabrion shares with us on what the professional writing retreat sponsored by NWP at WSU this summer was like.

If you weren't able to stop by the Macomb Intermediate School District this summer to visit with and meet our newest MBWP TCs, you can read their enthusiastic summary of their activities by Kathleen Skomski. Following that is an article by Desiree Harrison on how to implement "Poetry Fridays" into a middle school program. In addition, Lori Ostergaard has two things to share with us: an interview with Cornelia Pokrzywa who created her own gallery on social networking, "Add to Friends: Writing in Social Networks" (modeled on NCTE's National Gallery of Writing); you are welcome to contribute your own writing pieces to Cornelia's gallery- it's still open until June, 2010. Lori's other piece is about her experience of using new tools for composition with her own students (and this by someone who claims to be a "technophobe"). Last but certainly not least is Mary Cox's personal essay about her experience attending a writer's workshop for women in New Mexico called "A Room Of Her Own" (AROHO) sponsored by NWP's Urban Sites Network.

These pieces are well written, concise, informative, and inspiring. They demonstrate the NWP's basic premise that teachers sharing, talking, and writing with other teachers is the most effective form of professional development in this country; it is teacher-centered, teacher-driven, and teacher-friendly. We must support such organizations as the NWP and NCTE by participating in as many of their activities as we can, by sharing with one another at all levels and across all curricula, and by recruiting other like-minded colleagues to join in the effort to focus on getting our children to learn over time and for a life time, not just to perform well on a standardized test.

SUMMARY

Created by Lori Ostergaard (ostergaa@oakland.edu) on Tuesday, October 27, 2009
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