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# Opening Words: Why We Celebrate Teaching in Michigan

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## OPENING WORDS: WHY WE CELEBRATE TEACHING IN MICHIGAN

JONATHAN BUSH AND ALLEN WEBB  
EDITORS

What I now tell my students is that though Michigan may share certain things with Iowa or Ohio, it is the particular cocktail of subtleties—the details of geography, population, class, custom, slang, history, point in time—that gives a place its distinct flavor. If we write about our tiny corners of the world, and render them as truly as we can, then we’ve done our best.

Mary Beth Pope “*Searching for Michigan in the Midwest (Or, Learning and Teaching the Writing of Place)*”

Mary Beth Pope reminds us that Michigan is more than a place, with lines, borders, and figures. Rather, it is a concept that is complex and multi-layered. One of our goals when we took over the editorship of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* last year was that we emphasize writers from Michigan, who speak to the teachers of Michigan. This issue was an attempt to begin to capture that complexity and forefront the issues and ideas that make Michigan a unique and exciting place to teach.

With this goal in mind, we have assembled an eclectic and interesting mix of articles that have one thing in common: Michigan. They include memoirs, pedagogical discussions, lesson ideas, resources, vignettes, theoretical discussions, and interviews. At their core, they are about teaching, learning, and exploring issues in, about, and around our state. We hope that our readers can take this issue as a starting point to begin exploring issues of and about Michigan. We also hope that this issue will serve as a catalyst to other teachers from Michigan

who are interested in sharing their ideas in future issues.

We begin the issue by focusing on *Michigan Literature, History, and Literacy*, with an emphasis on ways that the knowledge of these issues can be integrated and/or emphasized in classrooms. The section begins with “Celebrating Great Lakes Literature” by Lynne Graft and Ruth Sawyers. In this interesting article, Graft and Sawyers argue that “the Midwest is more than topography; it exudes its own philosophical bent” and expand that notion by focusing a course at Saginaw Valley State University on writers from the Great Lakes. In their piece, we can see a way to break beyond traditional canons of literature and expand literary discussions to include concepts of place and culture.

This discussion is furthered by one of the most exciting pieces we have had in *LAJM* in quite awhile, Dwight Blubaugh and his students at Northwestern Elementary School in Eaton Rapids offer us “Celebrating One of Michigan’s Most Prominent Authors: Christopher Paul Curtis Keeps Us Turning the Pages.” In this interview, not only do we get an inside look at the writing process of this prominent Michigan-based author, but see a wonderful example of a teacher in Michigan who goes above and beyond to make literature relevant and real for his students. We hope other teachers who are studying Christopher Paul Curtis’ work use this resource to give their students insight into the mind and work of this exciting author.

We then turn our attention to Michigan history as Kelli Kilbourn presents “Celebrating Michigan History Through Writing.” In this piece, Killbourn teaches us that interdisciplinary projects like this help students “make a personal connection with the world and other cultures” and provide a valuable writing opportunity that prepares them for MEAP writing and other benchmarks.

The final article in this section, “Literacy in Two World” is written by Karen Vocke, a teacher educator who has worked extensively with teachers in both Michigan and Cuba. In her piece, she shows us that, despite differences in political conditions, social climate, and physical locations, teaching

focusing on critical pedagogy has innate similarities.

Our next section is *Michigan Teaching: A Celebration of Diversity, Professionalism, and Culture*. In this section, we include reflective pieces by teachers working in some of the diverse communities that make up Michigan. We begin with “Rural Poverty and the Importance of Place Value,” a poignant and informative piece by Angie Kirby. As she reflects on her experiences working in rural Michigan, Kirby offers us her story of working with a rural poor family, interspersed with research and resources designed to help other teachers. Next, Allen Webb and a group of newer teachers discuss ways to integrate a politically-charged text such as *I, Rigoberta Menchu* into the classrooms of Southwest Michigan.

The next piece, “Facing the Mirror: Hmong Students Struggle and Thrive in Saginaw,” by Nancy Renko, brings a little-known community and their issues to the forefront. From Renko’s piece, we can not only learn about Hmong and their culture, but also about ways to interact with students of all ethnicities and cultures throughout Michigan.

This section concludes with our “Teaching In/About Michigan: Resources for Teachers” column by Julie King, that summarizes online and print resources available for teachers. King provides resources that can assist teachers seeking to follow up on issues discussed in other parts of the journal, as well as summaries of some key professional development resources available to Michigan teachers.

Our third section includes *Memoirs of Michigan Teachers*. In “Searching for Michigan in the Midwest (Or, Learning and Teaching the Writing of Place)” Mary Beth Pope teaches us that “writing about place involves “so much more than the acronyms, histories and maps” and asks others to “write about our tiny corners of the world” as she reflects on her development as a teacher and writer with Michigan roots. Susan Schiller’s “Lesson Along the Way” then gives a wonderful example of one of those Michigan “corners” as she looks back on her childhood growing up in Gregory, MI and learning and developing in that environment. (A special

thanks to Elizabeth Blackburn-Brockman for helping develop this section).

Our final section focuses on *New Teachers in Michigan*. We begin with an article by Robert Rozema and his pre-service teachers reflecting on ways to integrate the work of one Michael Moore, one of Michigan’s most polemic figures, into the high school English classroom. The issue ends with Kia Jane Richmond’s “Focus on New Teachers” column in which she interviews several new teachers in Michigan and focuses discussion on their concerns and relevant issues. We hope that teacher educators are able to use this piece as a starting point for discussions in their classrooms about the realities of the early years of teaching.

The issue includes information and calls for participation in two key events in English language arts teaching: The MSU Spring Conference on English Language Arts on March 20, 2004 and the MCTE Fall Conference on October 8, 2004. Both are wonderful representations of the vital state of teaching in Michigan. You will see editorial staff at both conferences looking forward to talking to you about your ideas and how to share them in upcoming issues of LAJM.

As we conclude, we look forward to our next issues: *Professional Development* (Spring/Summer 2004), *Reading Matters* (Fall/Winter 2004), and *Writing Matters* (Spring/Summer 2005). We are seeking more Michigan voices to fill the pages with ideas, discussions, and classroom examples that continues to celebrate the teaching of English language arts in Michigan.