
A Letter from the Editors— Towards a Conversation:

It's a quarter to November. Time for lots of pretentious Halloween parties thrown by big-time car dealers at sprawling McMansions only incidentally for kids. In a week, the end of Daylight Savings Time will turn my morning commute from Bloomington to Mankato into a cold and pitch-black probe across the prairie. And there'll be lots to do once I've trudged from the farthest point in the parking lot (my first new car EVER!) through eddying funnels of fallen leaves to my office—piles of papers; thesis defenses to get ready for; exams to grade; student conferences to schedule; the details of class trips to button down; committee work to do and meetings to attend; and, yes, this year's issue of the *MEJ* to finally put to bed.

But there's always the sense for me around the first of November of turning a corner, making the transition from a long up-hill pull to a steady and controlled coast toward "finals." It doesn't matter that I haven't begun to see a fraction of the work I've assigned or begun to struggle with the damned reports I'll have to write. It's an attitudinal thing. The heat of late summer is *gone*. Bring on the frosty blasts and gray, sunless days. The rain and sleet driving against my office windows buoy my spirits. Call it perversity—however, my energy and enthusiasm for my work quicken with the onset of drafty windows and banging pipes. I *am* the Prince of Darkness.

Among the many things I'll be expending my second wind on this fall is a little faculty development organization called The Valley Writing Project. Originally formed through a big Bush Grant in 1979 to foster writing across the curriculum through annual workshops for faculty at State University campuses, the one at Minnesota State University—Mankato is the sole survivor. At first, these workshops (which recruited faculty from math, the natural and social sciences, engineering, nursing, computer technology, law enforcement, and the humanities) were wonderful mechanisms for social interaction for faculty who rarely got to interact with folks outside their own units. And they provided an effective means for faculty to share their ideas about how to incorporate writing in large classes, how to respond to that writing, and at the same time reinforcing the message that *all* of us are writing instructors.

I've been involved as a member of the VWP presentation team since 1986. The five team members from across the university (one of whom, Anne O'Meara, is well-represented in this issue of *MEJ*) spend a good part of the fall recruiting around twenty faculty participants, articulating the theme of the workshop that customarily occurs over three full days just before Christmas (this year's theme is "Writing Intensively"), dividing the labor of building workshop presentation segments, and gathering supportive materials that we'll gather into a large notebook for distribution to the participants.

There are a couple of relative "newbies" in our team—a chemist and a computer scientist who've been with us for only a couple of years, who are chronically overcommitted to far too many tasks, and, of course, that's why they are so *good*. But the rest of us—a professor of sociology and corrections, Anne, and I—have been connected with VWP forever. We can't let it go. Obviously, part of our attachment is to each other. We more than like each other. We feed off of each other's craziness and humor. Our meetings, which have just begun again, are profane little affairs. We expend a few minutes at the start of each meeting dishing the dirt of university gossip. But we all come together in our commitment to the improvement of student

writing, in assisting students with their struggles to focus, read, think critically about what they've read, write analytically, and rewrite beyond mere editing. That commitment includes assisting, where we can, instructors from a variety of disciplines, to evaluate the assignments they're contemplating creating for students, considering efficient and effective ways for responding to their students' writing, considering methods for incorporating re-writing in their classes, and constructing "tool boxes" (i.e., supportive activities, sometimes enabling the "staging" of portions of an assignment; explanations and short demonstrations of tasks crucial to the completion of a writing assignment; models of effective responses to assignments; web resources).

And the workshop ends with each faculty participant's identification of an assignment they want to build for a specific *real* course they'll soon be teaching. They'll each need to first clearly identify (and modify where necessary) the goals of the course they'll be building their assignment for. The assignment construction will come next, along with the need to fully understand how that assignment configures with their course goals. They'll need a rubric (not one of *my* favorites!) for evaluating that assignment, along with other supportive materials (their *own* tool boxes) to assist their students to respond successfully to it. And, in addition to developing a strategy for responding to the results of their assignment and for managing students' revision of their first attempt, they'll also need to invent an assessment tool for determining how well their assignment succeeded and how it can be fine-tuned to work better. By December 22nd, when we say good-bye to each other, all participants (the team members included) will have been assigned to a group of five other faculty. Their job, up to the time when we come together at the end of March for our "reunion," will be to meet and support each other in their work, seek feedback on the reports they each will be writing on their "assignment packages" and the relative effectiveness of those packages in their classes, and seek further aid and comfort from the "team" members. After they've presented these "assignment packages" to the larger group in March, along with what they've learned in the process (about

themselves as writing teachers; about their students as writers; about the faculty members in their group), we will—with their permission—publish these projects on the VWP website and make available to the rest of the MSU community what all of these folks have created.

It's pretty gratifying stuff for the "team" members. Of course, it's fun. We will have written and performed some new skits and "improvs" that support some of the issues we'll be engaging our participants in. We have no shame, and we'll laugh like hell. And we'll all *need* this release and interaction after a demanding semester of work. But we'll also discover among those participants a number of people—no matter what their professional discipline—who are and have always been writing teachers. We'll be expanding the network of truly committed teachers who are teachers of writing as well. We'll make their work public and accessible to their peers in order to expand that network. As most usually happens, faculty will leave that spring "reunion" feeling good about themselves and what they've done, about the connections they've made with similarly interested and challenged faculty from other areas, and about recommending what they have done to other faculty who may sign up for the next VWP workshop.

But, in the end, it's *all* about *communication*. I'm probably way off base here (consult Olson's and O'Meara's paper on student writing in high school and the university for some grounding here), but my feeling is that the greatest majority of us are fairly isolated in our professions. I don't mean that we're hermits or aliens. But, for the most part, we operate in our own little hermetic space. I find that talking to others—even those in the same department—about teaching (what we do in the classroom; how we respond to papers; what assignments we use; how we conduct class discussion; how we manage re-writes; how we construct our exams, and why; how we assess our own teaching; how we're using our classroom time) is a rarity. I know—we don't because we're *preparing* to teach those classes we don't talk about with others. At an otherwise forgettable meeting with my dean concerning her reaction to my most recent Four-Year

Professional Development Plan report, she and I mourned the loss of some of that collegial coming-together that occurred when I came aboard twenty-seven years ago—I remember Friday afternoon discussions about how each of us taught “Comp,” complete with our syllabi. We both—the dean and I—agreed that not much of this happens anymore and that all kinds of demands on faculty time had caused most of such opportunities to evaporate.

And that’s why I cannot let the Valley Writing Project go. As team members, we talk to each other about what we do with writing in our classrooms in ways that are not for the faint of heart. And we regale each other with what we do badly. No punch-pulling. And we expect no less from our participants in December (perhaps with a little cleaning-up of the language) because we don’t *lecture* to them. We *facilitate*—they must talk to each other and to us about what they’re doing; and they must *write*, early and very often and throughout the workshop.

Anne O’Meara will tell you if you ask her about her experience as chair of a university assessment committee charged with evaluating student performance in General Education “writing-intensive” courses offered across the university (“writing-intensive” can mean lots of things, but, for our purposes, it’s a course in which at least twenty pages of writing are assigned, at least ten of which—not very much at all, really—must be revised and re-written by the student under the instructor’s direction). The bottom line?—students performed *worse* than they had five years earlier (in their ability to use, evaluate, and cite evidence effectively; in their basic writing skills; in their ability to organize a piece of writing). The reasons for the evident decline in students’ writing performance in these classes are complex. Students don’t read, and, thus, their ability to read closely, carefully, accurately, analytically has declined. And there’s an immediate connection between students’ ability to write well and their critical reading and thinking skills.

But another reason for the abysmal results in those “writing-intensive” course assessments is the teaching. Instructors were all over the place in terms of the way they interpreted and implemented “revision.” In many cases, it seemed as if whatev-

er revision occurred in these courses proceeded with no faculty interaction. Why? Perhaps because many who were assigned to teach these courses had no training in teaching them. They were, by and large, newly-hired faculty, low on the pecking order, who'd been greeted upon their arrival on campus with this new responsibility. And these courses are among the most difficult to teach. Period. And one of the several recommendations of Anne's committee to the Provost and the assistant VP of Undergraduate Education was the need for a university commitment to train and incentivize instructors of "writing-intensive" courses.

Will that happen? I'm not going to bet my retirement on it. But, short of such a commitment, all of us need to be *talking with each other* about what we do and how we do it. I'm lucky that I have one such professional outlet for doing just that in the Valley Writing Project, and that, when we're not talking among ourselves and our participants about "writing-intensive" teaching issues and strategies, we're talking about our *own* writing and enlisting groups of each other in order to keep our writing projects moving forward. And, when we can't directly talk to each other, there need to be locations we can go to in order to read and interact with and respond to what our peers are saying about the profession, their teaching, their implementation of theory into their teaching, their struggles with various audiences of student learners and their attempt to engage them in various writing enterprises.

And you're about to be involved in one of those locations *right now*. This issue of *MEJ* is all about pedagogy. And there are some stunning pieces represented here, not the least of which is Peter Henry's award-winning laying-down of the gauntlet concerning testing. There's no question in my mind that this is the best issue of *MEJ* that I've been affiliated with over my little four-year tenure.

So read it. Swallow it whole. But do not forget your responsibilities as *readers*, as *audience*. There is an interactive function I'm counting upon you to energize. You'll find a second attempt to begin what the *MEJ* has never had before—a "Letters to the Editors" component. We want your reactions

to the essays contained here that have been written by talented writers and committed teachers. *They* want them. Please send your responses (they can be very short or expansive) to me (straits@mnsu.edu), but don't think that you need to restrict your responses and remarks and opinions to the contents of this journal issue. I refer you to a list of possibilities for this proposed new section of *MEJ* on the very next page.

Imagine that. A conversation. About teaching. About what we do and how we do it.

Enjoy. And I look forward to hearing from you.

Bill Dyer, Editor