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An Invitation To Write

By now, most of you have realized the Wisconsin English Journal has a new look, a new size. Changes continue to develop, reflecting the exciting and challenging ideas and issues in English/language arts today. We invite you to be part of this vital process by submitting your manuscripts, poetry, or opinions to WEJ.

We are currently planning to include focal themes in each issue. We would like to explore cultural diversity in the language arts in the Winter 1994 edition. A rich multi-cultural heritage has long been part of this country’s foundation; what kind of impact do these varied backgrounds, customs, and beliefs have on the current, or proposed, methods of teaching and learning English? How might, or should, we alter our content and method to embrace this variety more fully? Do we still pour into the melting pot, or do we appreciate the rainbow?

For the Spring/Summer 1994 edition, our intended focus is co-authored articles by teachers and students. Already highlighted with an example in the Spring/Summer 1993 issue, this manuscript call asks teachers to select a student-written sample of a writing assignment and, giving full credit to the student writer, discuss how and why that particular piece of writing is significant, successful, or meaningful. Personal reflections by both the student and the teacher could also be part of the collaboration. We would also like to see articles reporting on different teacher-student collaboration models: research, projects, experiments.

Looking ahead to 1994-95, we wish to focus on elementary language arts for the Fall issue, secondary (middle/junior high/high school) for the Winter, and post-secondary (graduate school/four-year/two-year/technical college) for the Spring/Summer issue. Articles may belong or short and may include any topic of concern to English/language arts teachers at those levels. Poetry is always welcome.

With this issue we are excited to introduce a new regular feature called “Dialogue.” Think of this as an opportunity to discuss an idea, opinion, technique you’ve read about in the WEJ. We know that among our readers exist a range of opinions and interests; let’s make those visible by talking with each other via the WEJ.

Please consider writing for and submitting your writing to The Wisconsin English Journal. We also encourage you to let us know if you have ideas for other focal issues in language arts, issues that you feel the Journal should explore. We look forward to hearing from you and sharing your thoughts with our readers.

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Note: If convenient, please send a copy of your manuscript on 3 1/2 inch computer disk with your submission. Either Macintosh or IBM format is acceptable.
A Note From The Editors About “Dialogue” . . .

We are pleased to introduce what we hope will be a stimulating feature of the Journal. In this section we will print responses to articles, poems, ideas published in our magazine. We invite brief essays, letters, requests for clarification or amplification, suggestions for further reading, etc. In other words, we want to see dialogue among our readers, those of us who care about this discipline and who recognize the value of healthy discourse. So read on and let us hear from you.

...The Editors

In his article entitled “The Canon” in the Spring 1993 issue of the Wisconsin English Journal, Jack Stark clearly and reasonably sets forth the case in favor of the notion of a canon of literary works, and includes a few hints about how such a canon might be assembled. I cannot agree with his conclusions, but I appreciate the spirit in which he offers them, and the clarity of his expression. His call for depoliticizing the debate has an appealing sound to it.

I must take issue, however, with Mr. Stark’s assumption that his own position is itself not a political one. Indeed because he deplores the “politics” implicit in objections to the very notion of canon and would exclude works because of their “political” purposes, it is clear that his position can only be a valid one if it is itself completely innocent of politics. Innocent it is surely not. I do not accuse him of insincerity; I am sure he truly believes that his view is apolitical. But it is precisely this belief in his position’s innocence that best illustrates the flaw in the very idea of canonicity.

Nothing is wrong with a person’s compiling a list of readings, or a list of good books, or a list of the world’s best works. Any of these lists is clearly that person’s assertion, largely subjective, and open to criticism from others. The problem arises when some of us wish that our lists would become everyone else’s list too. Even if the notion of the One True List were desirable, how can this list be compiled without discussion, debate, compromise—in a word, politics? Of course such decisions are political. They only seem non-political when all the decision-makers essentially share the same political positions. In this shared view, then, the debate only becomes “political” when uppie constituencies not sharing those positions ask to be heard. It is rather like asserting that racial segregation was innocent of politics until Rosa Parks “politicized” it.

Nor is canonicity any less political simply because the debate that created the One True List happened fifty years ago, or a hundred, or two hundred. Indeed the “test of time” argument is the most politically compromised of all. In effect it seeks to perpetually enshrine the politics of a bygone era—a political attitude of exclusion and privilege that scholars may conveniently deplore in these enlightened days, if only they can define the literature it championed as “apolitical.”

I would argue that the notion of a single canon has many more pernicious qualities than redeeming ones, and that the time and effort spent on establishing one would squander resources foolishly during these fiscally lean times. But this is neither the time nor the place for that larger argument. I mean here only to assert that, as long as one side in the debate attempts to portray itself as standing above the political fray, then we have no possibility for honest discussion.

— Marty Wood
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
Beowulf and Sir Gawain
Meet the Electronic Generation:
An Experiment with a Computer Conference

by Katherine Roberts
University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh

Most English teachers (as well as other teachers) know that writing is extremely important to the learning process. How better to articulate half-formed theories and work out hazy ideas? But formal writing assignments for evaluation are usually threatening arenas for students who are always concerned about grades; they are also time consuming for both students and teachers, so that teachers may well hesitate to add yet more formal papers to their list of assignments. The problem, then, is trying to find non-threatening ways to encourage writing to-learn without overburdening both instructors who do not need or want to grade yet more papers and the students who dread writing them. Many of us have tried journal assignments which are less threatening than formal essays, but I usually suspect my students of grabbing five different colored pens the night before journals are due to make up missed entries. Then, too, since the teacher is the only audience, students may tend to write deliberately for that audience of one—either to please or to shock. The question, then remains: How can we encourage students to engage themselves fully in written discourse which allows them to explore and develop their own ideas in a non-threatening environment outside of class?

One answer may be the asynchronous computer conference such as those discussed by Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe in the December 1990 issue of College English. Cooper and Selfe are concerned with providing students with forums that encourage students to use language to resist as well as to accommodate and should enable individuals to create internally persuasive discourse as well as to adopt discourse validated by external authority. (847)

These conferences are already being used with great effect in composition programs such as the one developed by Cynthia Selfe at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan. Such a conference may be set up in a computer lab, if one is available, or it may be set up to run on individual computers, either on a hard drive or on a disk. All that is necessary is a computer and a word processing program. The entries are all made in the same file consecutively. At some point, the teacher may have to start a new file because the conference may get very long. In any case, the instructor designs a prompt—a question, perhaps—for the students to respond to individually. The students then react to other responses as well as the original prompt. Thus, the conference becomes a class journal, with
the students writing for each other rather than for the instructor. This forum can provide the necessary non-threatening environment for writing that does not require the teacher to evaluate or the student to worry about grades. Such a journal may be kept in a notebook, of course, but somehow the electronic medium seems to remove inhibitions, perhaps because today's students have grown up in an electronic age.

In his article “The Accumulative Rhetoric of Word Processing” (1991), Ronald A. Sudon notes that word processing “helps unblock the flow of language not only at the point of production but also through the sense of context and collaboration encouraged by the public character of its video display” (942). This is exactly what seems to happen with class computer conferences.

During the Fall semester of 1991, I experimented with a computer conference in my sophomore level British Literature Survey (800 AD to 1800 AD). I have also used the conference in subsequent semesters, but all of my examples are from the first conference because I specifically asked that class for permission to publish their conference. They agreed, as long as their names were changed. The initial prompt was one that could apply to literature from the entire course:

I would like you to consider the virtues of heroes and heroines in the works you are reading; then think about the vices of villains and villainesses in the works. What are the differences in expectations for men and women? Are the requirements for heroes, heroines, villains, and villainesses different in our culture?

Since the course material was extensive, I wanted to use the conference initially to explore ideas that we might not have a chance to cover during class sessions. But I also wanted the conference to become the property of the class, rather than to continue to direct it myself. The only requirement was that entries had to relate to the class readings. Students were not graded on content, but were given credit for each entry they made. They were also allowed to use pseudonyms, but in order to receive credit, they had to reveal their identities to me at the end of the semester.

At the outset, I had planned to put the conference on the file server in our new networked computer lab. However, the lab was not completed at the beginning of the semester, so the prompt went on a disk which was kept in the English Department office. Students could use one of the four stand-alone machines available in the department, or they could use the machine in my office. I encouraged them to use my computer if they were not computer literate so that I could help them get started. At the beginning of the semester, some were afraid of the computer, but most quickly learned how to work with the hardware (IBM compatible) and the software (Word Perfect 4.2).

In subsequent semesters, the conference has been placed on the file server in the lab. Since I can’t often be there to help students personally, I developed a step-by-step guide beginning with “Turn on the computer. The switch is toward the back on the right hand side. Turn on the monitor with the button marked ‘power’ on the lower right of the screen,” and ending with “Expect things to go wrong; they will!” The students make entries in individual files of a sub-directory on the file server, which student-consultants in the computer lab place in a cumulative read-only file at the end of each day. That way, students can’t erase each other’s files by accident (something that occasionally happened when the conference was on disks).

In 1991, as in subsequent years, students approached the conference with the same reserve that they often bring to class discussions; the first responses (to such works as “The Battle of Malden,” “The Wanderer,” and Beowulf) were rather stilted and general in the manner of “what response does she want from me?” But soon the students began to lose their inhibitions. They began to make entries like the following (entries appear the way students wrote them, errors and all):

The virtues of heroes in our readings have been strength, courage, and a drive to be the best in everything from boasting to actual battle. The focus was on physical strength, not mental, therefore it came as no surprise to me that a “hero” in the Norse
literature would rather die to avenge the death of someone who gave him a few bucks than save his own life. Personally I think those guys might have had a few too many beers (meads, excuse me.) As for the heroines, they had it made. They didn’t have to fight or boast. They were basically party hostesses. They handed out a few beers, said a few eloquent words, got to wear some pretty heavy jewelry, and basically used their grace and charm to keep a lot of drunk guys from fighting... They were passive and ignored most of the time... Joyce, 9-12-91

Joyce continues her entry by discussing today’s heroines, who may be “just as aggressive as men and a lot more cunning because they obviously still have legs and chests on their side when everything else fails...” a comment she would not have felt free to make in a classroom setting.

Further evidence that the students responded more freely as the conference continued is a comment from another young woman. She says, “I have a distinct disadvantage over many of the people in the class who actually seem to know what they’re talking about when it comes to all the ancient British Lit stuff... it all seems so foreign from all the literature I have analyzed...” As the conference progressed, the entries, such as this one, became less formal and more “real.” The students began to explore their own new ideas instead of cautiously building on what seemed to be the most erudite of their classmates’ entries. When the students actually began to take charge of the conference, they asked if I ever planned to change the question that was becoming rather boring to them. I had been telling them that the conference was theirs and that they could direct it as long as it related to the readings. But they did not understand me until they began to feel comfortable with the conference and the computer. At that point, I told them that I would never put a different question on the conference—for that matter, it would apply to most of the semester’s readings—but that they could change the question whenever they wanted to. This entry was the result:

Well, I think it is time to try a different subject, or at least break from the sexist-hero topic that has been going on for many pages now. I have a question for everyone that has been wandering around in my head, waiting to be answered.

THE STORY OF SIR GAWAIN

This entry started a conference discussion about the influence of Christianity on the works we were reading, certainly a relevant approach to the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; students also started to explore their own beliefs and to compare them with what they saw in their assignments. In effect, the conference was encouraging them to reflect on the literature in a way that few of them would have been willing to discuss face-to-face in a classroom. The next entry is representative of the new direction:

To comment on Sir Gawain and the subject of Christianity, maybe it would be easier to understand if we compared it to our own society... Our society is filled with people living by a Christian faith, however it is not the one and only religion. Maybe, Gawain was a true Christian - while Morgan and Merlin were not. There may have been a spread of Christianity (I don’t mean to make it sound like a disease - spreading), but some may not have picked it up... people may have enjoyed magic and sorcery for entertainment. I have Christian beliefs, but I went to see Doug Henning once and thought it was great. If nothing else, it was fascinating! Who knows, maybe Doug Henning is Christian, but likes to dabble/dapple (whatever) in the art of illusion. Morgan and the Merlin might also have been Christian, but were interested in magic to fill their spare time. After all there was
Another student chose to use a pseudonym to make an honest assessment of her own beliefs about sorcery and religion:

To tell you the truth, sorcery and magic make the Bard uncomfortable. And that's not to say that I totally discount its existence or that I do not believe in its potential existence. It's that I probably DO! And I don't want to. And that's not to say I am a deeply religious person and shun such "paganism." I simply don't want to participate or observe or read about the world of the supernatural. Am I over dramatizing? Yes, when it comes to the likes of David Copperfield. But when I'm at a party and someone breaks out the "weegee" board, that's when I flip on MTV. I just prefer not "knocking on a door," so to speak that someday I will regret was opened from the other side. The Bard, 10-10-91

This entry is a demonstration that the computer conference was helping students relate to literature in one of the most desirable ways: through writing, they were using it as a mirror to discover things about themselves. As time went on, they generated topics dealing with specific characters, like the Old Man in Webster's Dr. Faustus, Archimago in Spencer's Faerie Queene, and Eve in Milton's Paradise Lost. Consideration of Paradise Lost also led to comparisons with Faustus and The Faerie Queene, the nature of sin, and the nature of mankind in general.

About halfway through the semester, I used a class session to discuss the conference. I had informed the class that the conference was an experiment, and I wanted their reactions to it. Most of the comments were favorable. One said that her friends were jealous because they wanted to participate in something like what we were doing. Another exclaimed enthusiastically, "We've never had a forum like this before!" When I asked if they could have made the same comments in a class setting, the students overwhelmingly replied that it would be impossible. One said that if she disagreed with someone in a class discussion she would probably decide it wasn't worth starting a debate and upsetting someone. Another said that it gave him an opportunity to think about a response and work it out without interruption. The one negative comment came from a young woman who felt that someone had been unkind in disagreeing with her and asked for more consideration. The response of another student intrigued me. She said that the conference was a way of trying out ideas, of floating them to see how people would react. Then she added, "It's like, once you put an idea on the conference, it's not yours anymore. It belongs to the conference. You might even come back the next day and disagree with it yourself." At that point, I knew that the experiment was a success.

As further proof of the worth of the conference, the entries toward the end began to examine the reasons for reading literature. Sam's entry was philosophical:

I'd like to take a stab at Pam's question concerning why we have studied certain authors. The main reason, it seems to me, for reading these authors is to understand the evolution of our own culture; the dominant ideas and conflicts of each historical period are reflected in the writings of the people we have read. What really interests me is that all of these writers are interested in what constitutes the "good" life. To a lesser extent they are providing entertainment, but I don't think that is the raison d'etre of their writing. They are telling us what kind of people are good and what kind aren't. Kind of a guide to good living via the various styles and devices that are used (poetry, essays, novels, etc.).... Sam, 11-25-91

This entry is a demonstration that the computer conference was helping students...

Less philosophical but just as interesting was this entry:

Well, we're here at the end of the semester, and I must say, I really did enjoy this class, although I probably complained about it more than any other class I had this semester, and that was only because some of the readings (ok....almost all of the readings) made me think, heaven forbid!

It was nice to see and hear others' opinion... on the computer conference, and in class the different people and their views were interesting to consider. I feel a little more "cultured" now that I've been forced to read some of the classics of British Literature, not to mention, I do a lot better at trivial pursuits now in the literature category!!! ....

Well, I gotta go play some tennis to release some finals tension and then I have to compose my essay for here
and get it done before tomorrow... gotta love finals, NOT!!! It was an interesting semester and I'm sure I'll see some of you around! Sue, 12-12-91

My intent when I started the experiment with the computer conference was to provide a forum for the students to explore and test their ideas, and certainly the conference did that. But they (and I) gained much more through the experiment. The ideas that flew around during class discussion were more thoughtful than I had expected from past experience. The papers were also developed more thoroughly; I noticed that many students tried out ideas on the conference that they later developed in greater depth in their papers. Before exams, I always give my students review sheets with suggestions for studying (lists of names, notes listing some of the concepts discussed, etc.). Often, students wrote comments or asked questions on the conference concerning the items on the review sheet, so the conference served as a study aid. Thus, essay questions on exams were discussed in greater depth than usual.

Another thing that surprised me was the length of most of the entries. Most of them were half a page long, or longer. Since I had not set a length for the entries, I expected many to make token entries of a few lines or so; this did happen occasionally, as when the Bard wrote simply, "I'm sick. I'm sorry." The computer conference encouraged students to relate to the course material and to each other in a way that was new to most of them—and to me. It also encouraged them actually to develop and put into words thoughts that may have remained nebulous without the conference. This conference, as well as subsequent ones, have convinced me that computer conferences provide a method of introducing more productive writing into almost any course without increasing to any great extent the work load of the instructor or the student. They are also just plain fun!

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I MIGHT

I might tell you your real name if you have one anymore. We wonder if we really know ourselves because we move things around on the shelves of our brains, myths on one side, parables on the other. Some things we don't even wonder at anymore, blasé, sophisticates on the run visiting every museum in sight, attending every concert pretending to like what we should like and not like what is not in. But we are interchangeable by then and have no name other than he or she.

We do not know who we are; we resemble all the others after all. We have lost our real names in the hills and valleys of received opinion and we wander among those trees forever.

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Peg Lauber
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire

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Lord of the Flies
Pre-reading Activity

by William M. Heuer
Spencer High School

If you're fishing for a way to set the hook and reel in your not-so-enthusiastic readers, try this pre-reading activity for *Lord of the Flies*. Divide your students into groups of four. Strand them on an uninhabited non-tropical island. Individually assign each group member to explore a portion of the island and to write a descriptive report of what he/she sees there, using all five senses. Each person should also indicate the potential of anything found there for use in the group's survival.

Next, have each individual read his/her descriptive report. The person designated by the group and its leader should take notes for the next section of this activity.

Based upon the descriptive reports of the group members, have each group draw a map of its island, delineating major landmarks and geographical features as well as identifying where the group will set up camp, grow food, etc.

Provide your students with tag board, preferably a twenty by thirty size, for them to construct their map: include a map legend, and have them label their island nation with an original name.

Following the completion of their maps and submission of them for grading, each group is to create a flag symbolizing the hopes and dreams of its island nation. I provide the following symbolic chart:

- **Red**—Honor, love, evil
- **Yellow**—Happiness
- **Blue**—Bravery or remembrance
- **Green**—Peace, tranquility
- **Purple**—Royalty, wealth, fertility
- **Orange**—Friendship
- **Black**—Death, evil, sadness
- **Brown**—Nature, earth, home

Students usually complete this activity within one class period.

Providing students with immediate feedback is important regarding these activities, so I make a point of returning their graded maps and flags during the next scheduled class meeting. After each group shares with the class the origin of its island's name, any of its features, and the symbolism of its map, I collect the maps and flags and display them in the room by hanging them from the ceiling. This validates their creativity and provides them with reinforcement via praise from other students who share their classroom.

As a follow up to this activity, the groups' members make an important discovery. As each member is out gathering food, he/she hears a sound in the brush, looks up, sees a large beast, and rushes back to camp to tell the others. Each member writes a description of the beast he/she saw. Then each member takes turns reading his/her description to the group. Each group then produces a composite picture of the beast. These are collected, graded, and displayed along with the maps and flags in the classroom. At this point, I hand out the *Lord of the Flies* novels and ask them to read the first three chapters, looking for parallels between the activities they have just finished and the action in the novel. By this time, the majority of the students have swallowed the bait.
Toward a ‘Critical Rationale’ for Practice

by Brian Lavendel
Edgewood College

In the Fall 1992 issue of *Wisconsin English Journal* (Vol. 35, No. 1), Thomas Bucholz poses the question “How do we do what we do?” His article raises yet another question for me: “Why do we do what we do?”

The answer to this question lies in what Stephen Brookfield (1990) calls a “critical rationale for practice.” A rationale is a “set of values, beliefs, convictions about the essential forms and fundamental purposes of teaching” (p.15). The term “grounding philosophy” is another way of describing this concept. The question is “what motivates us as teachers?” This concept deals with the teacher’s personal philosophy of her role as educator. Such a rationale is important in most any profession to the extent that it provides a guide for formation of personal and professional goals. My “rationale” for examining the matter is that, as a relatively new educator, I sense the need for a grounding philosophy in my practice and hope that, through an examination of the issue and a bit of reflection on it, I can begin to formulate my own version of a critical rationale.

Before going further, however, we must discuss an argument which questions the need for a rationale. Sometimes teachers act as if their role in the development of their students were somehow neutral, as if there weren’t moral, social, or political implications to their actions in the classroom. My response to that claim would be to argue that an underlying rationale, though perhaps disjointed or scattered, does in fact exist, but the rationale is not explicit and therefore is not subject to analysis. Rather than try to deny the existence of such a rationale and its implications, we need to recog-
progress (or lack thereof) in achieving objectives. This process of evaluation also tells me whether I am achieving my goals. Thus, goals provide not only the “destination,” they allow us to assess whether we arrive.

Another reason for having a grounding philosophy has to do with the evaluation of that philosophy itself. If the educator does not make her “rationale” explicit, she will not be able to examine it, consider it, discuss it, interrogate it. To continue with the example above, I might discuss the importance of critical reading skills with my colleagues, and indicate that it is my belief that students are well-served by developing such skills. I could wax eloquently on the need for critical reading skills in a democratic and capitalist society. If I make a good case, perhaps I will influence another instructor, whose rationale differs from mine, to modify her rationale to include the development of critical reading skills. Or perhaps she will convince me that helping students develop their fluency or level of comfort with writing will empower them to participate in society and to effect change through their writing. This staff room scenario is illustrative not so much in its specific content as in the demonstration that without the articulated rationales of these two instructors, such an exchange could never take place. This example shows that by developing a conscious and explicit rationale for teaching, educators can begin to discuss and interrogate their own grounding philosophies.

I have also found another benefit to articulating a critical rationale—respect. Students are comforted in knowing that their teacher holds serious and lasting objectives for his own work as well as that which he asks of them. Students can sense when a teacher is operating from a critical rationale, and they respect it. In fact, I have found that when I articulate a rationale to students, they not only respect it, they try to support it. Instead of working in an adversarial mode, I can work with my students to achieve what then become our mutual objectives. But students are not the only group which appreciates an explicit rationale. Colleagues, too, respect a teacher who is able to articulate a critical rationale, even though they may not share it (as in the staff room scenario above). If I can back up my actions with such a rationale, others—be they students, fellow teachers, or administrators—are more willing to support me in my methods and objectives.

Once we have come to see the value of having a rationale for the practice of education, the next step is to develop one. Increasingly, educational theorists have begun to consider—and to question—the issue in more explicit terms. Here I turn to some theorists in the field of education who not only address the need for a critical rationale—but go so far as to propose such rationales. In the remainder of this article, I quote from some versions offered by these theorists. As you read their views about rationales for practice, consider how you might articulate your own.

Giroux (1989) stresses the moral aspects of a critical rationale. He bases his call for a morally-centered rationale on...

...the construction of sensibilities and social relations that give meaning to a notion of community life that understands democracy as a struggle for extending civil rights and seriously improving the quality of human life. Central to this approach is the need for critical educators to develop a substantive moral rationality. (39-40)

Gary Fenstermacher (1990) also emphasizes the moral nature of the educator’s task.

How is it possible to conceive of teaching disconnected from its moral underpinnings?... Without the specifications of the moral principles and purposes of teaching, the concept amounts to little more than a technical performance to no particular point.... A teacher who is without moral purpose is aimless, as open to incivility and harm as to good.... The moral dimensions of teaching are often ignored or forgotten. (132-33)

Kenneth Sirotnik (1990) proposes a rationale...
that emphasizes what he calls “critical inquiry.” “To inquire is to be thoughtful, reflective, and informed; to seek and use information; to describe, explain, interpret, and evaluate new and existing knowledge....” Sirotnik, too, emphasizes that teaching has a moral basis: “Critical inquiry... is a moral activity. It is what educators ought to be modeling in their classrooms and what they ought to be engaged in as individually reflective practitioners and as reflective collectives of practitioners” (313-14). Tom sums up the argument:

In a sense, almost every aspect of teaching involves a moral component, partly because teaching is by definition a social encounter and partly because the social encounter involved in teaching entails an intervention by one person in another person’s intellectual and personal development. (40)

Reading these excerpts, it becomes apparent that there is a common element underlying the notion of a critical rationale for practice: morality. It seems that, in the end, one thing the educator cannot avoid is the question of morality—and the other side of the same coin: immorality. In part, this begs the question, for the definition of “moral” is, at best, relativistic, and at worst, tautological. But the educator must make moral choices from moment to moment in front of a classroom; thus, we answer the unanswerable question whether we consciously choose to or not.

The development of a critical rationale, however, allows us to form the answers (not to mention the questions) in a more explicit, intellectually honest way. Further, it allows us to critically examine our answers. My goal here is not to “sell” any of these rationales. Rather, it is my hope that this discussion will prompt a consideration of our own philosophies of teaching—our motivations, objectives, destinations—so that we, too, can articulate a critical rationale for practice.

REFERENCES


Old Love

Calico shadow, eyes of blue
Skies, soft skin bleached to toughness
By strong soap, by work, by hard times,
Let me sing to you an old love song.
Old love that sings the horse grazing,
Noble but unable to pull the plow.
Barn, bone bleached, with bright flowers
Splashed like young rain on a dark window.
Old cloth worn beautiful in the sun of days.

And would it be wrong for me
Who has grown old with you,
A weed someone left beside a Fading flower when the garden autumned,
To say “I love you even more
And I am glad that we are old Together”?

— Richard L. Kirkwood
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
Revolutions of the Heart

Reviewed by Jon E. Paulson  
Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Cory K. lives in two separate worlds—one populated by the white residents of Summer, a small town in Wisconsin, and the other, the lives of the Native Americans on a nearby reservation. Central to this conflict is Cory’s romantic involvement with a Native American boy, Mac. Against the backdrop of the recent spear fishing controversy in Northern Wisconsin, Marsha Qualey’s Revolutions of the Heart explores how people change their attitudes and their lives when confronted by people and ideas different from themselves. The characters are wonderfully drawn, especially Cory K. and Mac. Cory always does something unpredictable, whether dancing on tables in the cafeteria or taking suitable revenge on a would-be suitor. Mac acts like a teen-age boy who happens to be Native-American, rather than the other way around. Cory’s friend, Tony, serves as a counterpoint to her brother—a reformed racist. Tony’s girlfriend, Sasha, acts more like a liberal conscience than a person, spouting off platitudes in almost every line. Cory’s conflict with her brother, Rob, exposes the reader to the variety of issues both characters must face—racism, differing values, the death of a parent. Both characters react to the events in different ways and Rob is just as unpredictable as Cory. The characters speak with intelligence and their dialogues and exchanges sound snappy and realistic.

Unfortunately, these characters get wasted on the melodramatic plot of Revolutions of the Heart. Like an episode of television’s Life Goes On, the characters in this book suffer at almost every turn. Cory has a freak car accident that wrecks no one but a store window. She has to work housekeeping for a racist manager at a local motel. Cory’s mother dies. Cory and Rob end up on opposite sides of the spear fishing issue. Cory and Mac fall in love, but Mac has to leave to find his people. Conceivably, all this could happen to someone within the space of a few months. Qualey, however, seems to turn all the events into mini-lessons. For example, Cory rescues Mac from the anti-spear fishing mob. He’s hurt, and “everyone” they know is at the protest or otherwise occupied. Since Cory has the keys to the local motel (she’s one of the housekeepers, remember), they go there. They fall asleep after some temptation, but don’t have sex, since Cory has already delivered a lecture on premarital sex. You guessed it—the motel manager finds them and assumes the worst. This contrived situation sets up the “climactic” scene between Cory and her brother, which also smacks of melodrama.

Qualey presents her theme with similar grace. She bombards the reader with messages about “revolutions of the heart,” i.e. changing the way of the world with love by changing those closest to you. I liked the idea and the further implication that this is the one true legacy Cory receives from her mother, but I didn’t need to hear about it on four separate occasions.

It’s too bad these great characters are wasted on such a manipulative plot and heavy-handed theme. Mac, Cory K. and Rob all need some breathing space to develop. Qualey has instead written them into situations where they must revert to type and react as television characters might. As the book progresses, the wit and intelligence shown in the first five chapters are replaced by artifice. At the end, Qualey again gives them room to move and they soar. Revolutions of the Heart requires quieter epiphanies and smaller revolutions to explore the themes presented—more dignity, less audacity.

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Revolutions of the Heart  
Marsha Qualey  
Suggested Ages: 12 and up  
Houghton Mifflin, 1993  
$13.95
I realized that, along with their peers at sister institutions, these students will shape the future of our profession. It was the first class session of the year and students were in the process of selecting a book-length work to read together. Making a choice everyone could live with seemed doubly important since each of them, as a requirement for an English teaching "methods" course, would be preparing a unit's worth of lesson plans suitable for teaching the work at the high-school level.

The group had looked over reports by researchers cataloging the titles typically taught in public school English, in relation to what has come to be known as the literary "canon." The students were dismayed but not surprised to learn that the list had changed little in decades. I pointed out that they, as future teachers of English, could view this information in several ways. They might, for example, logically consider selecting for this project a traditionally-taught title that they could reasonably expect to have the opportunity to teach. On the other hand, if they wished to be a bit more innovative, they could consider other books.

I realized that, along with their peers at sister institutions, these students will shape the future of our profession. To my surprise, they had little trouble reaching consensus which Laura Bakke, a lively, fifth-year student, seemed to capture: She preferred a title that would enlarge her "personal canon."

What Laura assumes is that, in the best of possible worlds, it is natural for teachers to choose texts independently, relying to a large extent on their own critical judgment. Perhaps it goes without saying that teachers have always considered such questions thoughtfully. Yet, the concept of canon as "personal" startled me since I had never heard it discussed in such terms. This simple phrase, I think, articulates what has been at stake in much of the recent debate regarding the nature of literary works that have a rightful place in English classrooms in the remaining years of the 20th century, and beyond.

Those viewing canon as a matter of inheritance, who might be termed traditionalists, often argue that by definition the greatest works are the enduring ones, books with staying power, books that stand the "test of time." On the surface, this stance seems a reasonable one, acknowledging the wisdom of authors, scholars, and teachers who

by Christian Knoeller
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire

chromosomes, seem destined to replicate themselves. I suspect that there are a variety of factors that conspire to favor an instructional status quo in our dating back to recommendations issued in 1894 by the "Committee of Ten," chaired by Harvard's president. This group, which deliberated fully a century ago, sought to establish specific literature at the core of the English curriculum, contributing to a definition of the discipline still widely heeded today. Interestingly, then as now, the issue revolved around a college-admissions test—in our time, the Advanced Placement examination in literature. It is no secret that all too often, and without apology, such tests can in effect "drive" curriculum in the schools when instructional materials—both textbooks and literary titles—are selected by districts, departments, and teachers specifically to match what is likely to be addressed on a particular standardized examination. Ironically, the influence of testing itself can contribute in this way to curricular inertia.

Choices made by commercial publishers have also historically constrained the range of texts taught. Especially at earlier grade levels where textbooks provide representative bits of literature, as well as at the secondary level when anthologies are assigned, the choice of a particular publisher will dictate which authors students read. Without going into detail here, general market forces and specifically the political climate surrounding textbook adoption, both locally and nationally, as a rule tend to discourage both daring and diversity.

Finally, practical considerations such as district budget allotments for books can also limit the range of works available. Moreover, some teachers, especially those facing large classes, may at times find the prospect of preparing lessons to address unfamiliar literature a daunting one. Given this combination of constraints on curriculum, it is little wonder that book lists have historically proved so rigid and resilient. Yet, against all odds, such institutional strictures occasionally give rise to significant reform.

One alternative is simply to allow choice; letting students select some of the titles they are to read, after all, in no way precludes also assigning others. Jim Gray, founder of the National Writing Project, as one example, lined the walls of his own...
The dilemma of finding a place for Shakespeare strikes me as almost allegorical. This morning, I've been rearranging my library again. In fact, following a lengthy stint in graduate school and a cross-country move, it felt as though I were organizing it all from scratch. The question, of course, is how to do so. There are, I began to realize, a variety of approaches. Some distinctions seemed at first to be straightforward. I could separate works in English, for instance, from those in other languages. I could sort by subject with one shelf for linguistics, another for anthropology, a third for literary criticism. I discovered I could also shelve by genre, devoting the top shelf to novels while housing poetry floor to ceiling by the door. Textbooks, a genre unto itself, could be broken out by discipline. When time allows, I might even alphabetize.

What began to interest me were books that challenged the categories I had created: those that belonged nowhere, it seemed, and those that belonged in several places at once. Where, for example, would a book of poems in Spanish go, or, for that matter, any literature in translation? Did a collection drawing on the oral tradition of Native Americans belong to anthropology or to poetry? After weighing such books in both hands, however, even these works ultimately found their rightful places in my collection. Yet I have set several aside on the desk for further thought.

There is still the question of finding a place for Shakespeare: The Dramatic and Poetical Works in six, leather-bound volumes. I was left this edition by a great uncle when he passed away a few years ago. These were, as I remember it, along with a Bible, among the few books he owned. Printed in London, the set is obviously well-made, intended to last a lifetime or so. In a very real sense, then, Shakespeare is my literary inheritance.

The dilemma of finding a place for Shakespeare strikes me as almost allegorical. One thing is clear: no other author writing in English has ever commanded the same attention, nor is another likely to. Moreover, few texts in our language so transcend the categories for literature, however any of us might define them.

Is it really inviting anarchy to think that we all judge for ourselves the relative pleasure and merit of the various works we read and, as teachers, assign? For if canon formation is in fact a democratic process in the truest sense, then all of us are implicated, not only as teachers but readers. The same might be said of our students, as Laura reminds us, defining themselves as contemporary readers sharing in the rich literary heritage that is the study of English—sharing also in the process of forever making it our own.

Those leather-bound books are still on my desk.
Teenage Traveler

You've moved to the basement
in a room
like the bottom of your mother's purse,
a tossed salad space
with carpeting under your clothes
a washer and dryer
that rumbles into your dreams
and your bathroom: paradise.

Your mother and I were worried
you had moved overseas
started a new life,
grown your hair long and straight,
started calling us by first name.

One Saturday morning
armed with long snout of the vacuum
I crossed the border into your space,
sucked in the dust
(you said didn't matter)
and wiped down the mirror
(including your messages in toothpaste).
But when I stabbed at the long-legged spiders
you intervened,
"Dad, don't touch them,
I've named them all."

So it's true,
you are a foreigner
with dual citizenship
keeping friends with a tribe
of long-legged weavers.

Drop us a line,
or better,
a recent photo
so we can compare
the girl who grew up here
to the spelunker who has opened herself
to the customs of her bedroom corners.

— Patrick Phair
Waupaca High School
Being Amazing

I know one day I'll be dead...
standing up, one body in the arch of one form, solid
gravestones picket in denial, their denial of—death
was a good son
a fine citizen
a caring mother and daughter
a father's father

I sit aware of my flesh
aware of the blood,
the dead protein of finger nails covering
my living skin.

Death covering life—
life covered by death
hair giving warmth, cool and dead.

In my daily life
i am warmed by light
by sun which is life
and fluorescence which is death.
i am warmed to live
and die to cold, like ash.

My skin replaces itself
dying off, flaking in its silent and dusty falling
cell by cell as I die to live
i live to die,
caught in that cycle of changing
even as I breathe, alive.

I am here alone, I
sit in company, eternity
my space is taken up by me
for me—
i bring myself into space
held in this time
living and dying or

Just changing, being
80 some thousand species of life
from the tiniest leptoned form of existence
to a human-being

A cow, a fly, an insect—swatted
finding itself in a new life
moving from one form to another, being
caught in the form of incarnations
changing, amazing.

—Anthony W. Ferguson
Undergrad. Student, University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
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