A Wisconsin Resource for Visual Literacy and Visual Materials in the Language Arts Classroom
Their Aim is True: Language Arts at Arrowhead High School

By David Furniss

Kathy Nelson's email last fall setting up my visit to Arrowhead High School ended this way: "I love showing off our school. I'll try to be modest, but you'll see just how proud I am of our school." Her pride was indeed obvious throughout the day, as were the reasons for it. Arrowhead High School is very impressive on the outside. There are two campuses, the South Campus serving the 9th and 10th grades, the North Campus housing the juniors and seniors. About 2400 students go through the doors every day, and over 200 teachers work with them. The Language Arts department has 19 teachers. Arrowhead is located in the suburban community of Hartland, Wisconsin, nicely situated between Madison (30 minutes away) and Milwaukee (45 minutes).

Kathy had prepared a wonderful itinerary for my one-day journey through that Thursday's ten class periods. I began with a classroom full of 9th grade boys in Dave Gierach's English class and finished, fittingly enough, with a visit to Department Chair David Watry's journalism class, sitting next to him at his command post in the center of a very busy room full of bright and self-directed students preparing the next issue of the school paper. (I must have been a slow news period: David asked one of the students to interview me!) In between, I visited Dave Gierach's classroom again, this time watching him work with a group of 9th grade girls. I talked with Janine Hunter about cooking and her vision for the future of our schools, watched Liz Jorgenson keep a group of seniors creatively occupied throughout a double period, and talked with a librarian everyone should meet, Donna Smith, in a wonderfully designed and equipped library. (You'll read more by and about Dave, Janine, Liz, and Donna later).

By the end of the day, I could count dozens of other reasons why Kathy Nelson is proud of her school. While the school is very impressive physically, but the educators I met that day are much more so: they would be bright, inspiring teachers and thoughtful, supportive colleagues in any setting. I'll devote the rest of my piece to a few examples, and let the later articles do the rest. I hope that when you come to the end of this issue, you'll see why Kathy loves her job, and how lucky those Arrowhead students are.

Dave Gierach and the Same-Sex Classroom

"Are you going to film us?" one of the boys in Dave's first-hour class asked. It wasn't an odd question. Film crews and reporters had indeed visited same-
sex classes at Arrowhead on more than one occasion; this was news, after all. Unfortunately, from the first hour class’s point of view anyway, the girls got all the attention. Dave had a simple explanation for this (one not particularly flattering for the media). The girls’ class met later in the day, at a time more convenient for the reporters and camera crews. So it was understandable that the boys were a bit disappointed to learn that I was a camera-less observer in a much-less glamorous role.

This year, Arrowhead embarked on an action research project on the question of whether some students would be better off in same-sex classrooms. The inspiration for the experiment is the work of Leonard Sax, founder of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education and author of *Why Gender Matters and Boys Adrift*. Arrowhead’s procedure was to pilot this approach using a small group of students whose prior achievement test scores were similar. A group of 9th grade boys and girls was chosen and placed in same-sex classes for English and Science. The hope was that these students’ performance in class and on tests would give an indication of whether Sax’s hypothesis is valid.

Students in Dave’s two same-sex classes follow the same curriculum. In both classes, the students are placed in groups of four or so and work cooperatively within groups and competitively between them. When I visited, the 9th graders were completing a unit on *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The group with the best *Western Front* project would be excused from the next grammar test.

The boys were actually a bit ahead of the girls, having finished their elaborate 3-D maps earlier. Sadly, my timing was poor: most of their work had been disassembled and cleaned up before that Thursday. The girls were in the last stages of their group projects: which involved videotaped skits and other materials instead of a 3-D map.

Dave reported that all of the male groups received an A on the project; they were engaged from the start. The girls were less so. Some female groups were finding it difficult to work effectively together, with some individuals taking over and others left on the sidelines. It turns out that this mirrored the results Dave has observed all year. He has found that the boys take to this model very well, and their test scores have been increasing significantly. However, he is not convinced at this point that the approach helps girls. Their test scores, while a bit higher than last year, were the lowest of all 9th grade classes. Dave said that the girls are “more rebellious,” more resistant to working in groups, more susceptible to distractions caused by the social dynamics in a 9th grader’s life. He noted that these problems might be exacerbated by the back-and-forth nature of the day for these students: they have the two same-sex classes interspersed with their other co-ed classes.

Dave says that he’s mainly “watching behavior” during the first year; no one really knew what to expect in the fall, of course. The project will continue next year, and I hope I can convince Dave to tell us more about it then.

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Editor’s Note

Dear WEJ readers:

I’m happy to report that the WEJ spring issue tradition continues. For the fourth year, we devote this issue to an “outstanding English/language arts department” from Wisconsin: Arrowhead High School in Hartland. It was my great honor and pleasure to visit the school twice: for a short introduction last November, and a day-long visit in March. I visited several classes and talked with inspired and inspiring teachers all day.

Several of these teachers submitted articles that I know you’ll find thoughtful and provocative. And entertaining. I’m also very impressed that three students had the talent and moxie to write for this issue. This is my first attempt to bring out WEJ on my own, as my colleague and dear friend, Ruth Wood, enjoys a long-overdue sabbatical this term. So I am especially thankful to the Arrowhead teachers and their students for making this such an enjoyable experience for me.

Thanks to everyone involved in this issue:

David Watry (Chair) Catherine Cruci
Frank Balistreri David Gierach
Janine Hunter Liz Jorgenson
Diane Judd Michelle Verkler
Carole Peronto
Donna Smith (I’ve never met a more dedicated librarian)
Those brave and talented students: Laura Bauer Sam Lueliwitz, and
Emma Smurr

Finally, particular thanks to Kathy Nelson for her efforts in scheduling my visit, her enthusiastic donation of time during a busy school day, her two wonderful pieces for this issue, and her great choice of restaurant.

Ruth and I hope that this issue will inspire you to nominate your school for next year. Look for us at the WCTELA convention in Madison next November.

David Furniss, Co-Editor

And of course, I hope those boys get a moment in the bright lights.

Janine Hunter’s Recipe
I was eager to meet Janine Hunter, having heard about her popular after-school cooking show, and about her forthcoming book, Fueling Our Schools. We talked during her free period about both of these projects. She’s a twenty-eight-year veteran teacher, highly regarded by her colleagues, and someone I’m sure we’ll be hearing a lot more about. Interestingly, while her cooking show is open to every student at Arrowhead, it mainly attracts boys. On her own time, she arranges for the students to produce and film the show, which airs on the Arrowhead Channel. She enjoys the way this context alters (for the better) the teacher-student relationship.

Building on the cooking metaphor as its title suggests, her upcoming book promises to be an impassioned call to action, ambitious in scope and intent. She gave me a written summary of her upcoming book and the inspiration behind it. Rather than attempt a poor paraphrase, I’ll quote excerpts of it here. Think of it as an appetizer, an amuse bouche, if you will. I hope it won’t be long before she serves us the rest.

I am a public high school English, speech and drama teacher. I have two Master’s degrees: an M.A. in Communications and an M.S. in Educational Psychology. My plan was to leave teaching seven years ago and work in the community as a therapist specializing in the areas of family, children, and adolescent therapy. I spent three years working part-time as a therapist in a psychiatric hospital. I decided not to take that route, but have been forever grateful for the experience. My twenty-eight years of teaching experience, dealing with parents, teachers, young children and teens, has given me volumes to write about.

The premise of my book is that fueling our schools is the prerequisite for fueling our nation. The recipe for the much-needed fuel has four main ingredients: parents, children, teachers and administrators. The recipe is straightforward and the ingredients are listed in the order in which they must be added. Note also that the ingredients must be measured equally: if one is left out or a mistake in measurement occurs, it will spoil the soup.

I’ll step aside now so you can hear from the key players, those other hard-working and committed Arrowhead educators. I think it makes sense to have my wonderful guide, Kathy Nelson, talk about beginnings: how she starts her students’ school day. Donna Smith will conclude with the remarkable account of how she led an successful defense of The Perks of Being a Wallflower. She, her colleagues, Arrowhead students, and community members banded together to fend off a well-organized and determined effort to remove it and other titles from the curriculum, a challenge that received national attention. As a teacher educator with a deep interest in this issue, I found Donna’s description of this episode truly inspiring. Enjoy these two pieces, and everything in between.
My Three-Minute Miracle Prescription: Class Minutes

By Kathy Nelson

Several years ago, I borrowed an idea I must have heard at a conference or read in a professional journal. I wish I could recall my source so I could credit and thank him or her. But read on, for I'm passing on my little secret to better classroom management, to meeting State Standards, and to authentic assessment.

All my classes start every period with my trademark activity, class minutes. We begin the semester with my modeling just how it's to be done. When I have a student teacher, he/she gets the honors. Much like a business, professional or organizational meeting, class minutes serve as a record of important business conducted during the class period. I describe the minutes-taking process, record the significant actions taken during class, enter them in an easy-to-follow template, and then make copies to distribute the next day at the start of class. I begin class reading the minutes from the previous day, ask students for any additions or corrections and pencil them in, and I ask if we can approve them as read (or amended). Once the previous day's minutes are approved, we move on to assigning the next day's minutes to a student, who begins taking notes. Sometimes I start with a student who's been in one of my classes previously. Other times, I have used a fish-bowl random draw for order; but, snaking through the rows works best. Students then take turns for the remainder of the semester actively listening, note taking, word processing, and then orally presenting their assigned day's minutes to the class the following day.

Usually, each student takes minutes once each of our three 6-week grading periods. I vay the rubric from time to time and class to class. I emphasize technical writing skills, such as adhering to the template/format and to the deadline, conciseness, appropriate tone, and active voice. Often a teachable moment appears within someone's minutes and, when time permits, we take advantage of it.

I began this as a means of addressing our school's school-to-work initiative. Little did I know how many other benefits would follow. A heightened sense of community grew from students' need to know one another's names to include in minutes. Students enjoy hearing their name and getting recognition from their classmates for contributions they make to class. I forego those little chats with a student who returns from an absence and wants to know what he/she missed. I refer those students to the previous day's minutes to be shared at the beginning of class. In the beginning, I make a show of actively listening and non-verbally responding to minutes as they are read. Lifting an eye brow when I hear something not quite right is all I need to do to get students raising their hands with corrections when prompted. Some students love playing the role of finding any needed corrections. Others quickly praise those well done. After a while, if necessary, I can multi-task and take attendance, ready the overhead, or return papers during the reading of the minutes. It really does only take about 3 minutes.

Grading only one paper per class per day makes adding another writing assignment to the curriculum manageable. When short of time, I look only for that which we've been focusing on that round. Other times, I get a chance to connect with students a little longer. Minutes also give me a student's perspective of how lessons go. When I first started, I realized how much I was monopolizing the class. Now I intentionally plan my lessons for student-directed classes where my name appears infrequently in the minutes.

This authentic exercise parallels what students may actually experience outside the academic world, whether in a business setting or as a member of a church, civic, or neighborhood association group. It addresses most of the State English Standard including Oral Communication/Listening, Writing, Reading, Technology/Word-Processing.

One of my honors students even got creative with his minutes presentation. He presented his as a 007 mission to learn just what happens in an American high school English class.

Another time, a student had left his minutes at home on his computer table. He phoned his mother who read them to our class on the speaker phone.

Start your next class minutes. You, too, can see miraculous results.
Interview with the English Teacher:
A Look at the Inner Workings of Mrs. Diane Judd

As bravely recorded by Sam Luellwitz (a student)

1. What inspired you to force yourself to tolerate high school students?

"Tolerate"—very funny. Touch of masochism perhaps? Martyr complex? Seriously, I've always really enjoyed teaching juniors and seniors. Sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds are capable of discussing serious subjects. Most aren't yet jaded, and they keep me current. They keep me young(ish) in spirit.

2. Is it hard to teach three different subjects?

I often feel I have Multiple Personality Disorder, or at least Adult Onset ADD. On a given day, I might be teaching Macbeth in British Lit., the Iliad in World Lit., and Good Omens in Modern Lit. Since I reread the material each year (or choose new authors/work), I still spend lots of outside time preparing for classes. I also give daily quizzes on the readings in each class. Though I have taught these subjects for the last few years, in my time at Arrowhead I have also taught Grammar and Usage, Intermediate Composition, Advanced Composition, American Literature (Accelerated, Regular, and Remedial), Modern Literature in its first incarnation (quite a different course), British Literature, as a one-semester course, and Business English. I was offered AP English, but I declined, as my daughter was taking it at the time. On the plus side, teaching three subjects makes the day go faster, as there's not much repetition.

3. How do we know you aren't just making up facts as you go? What kind of credentials do you have? ... Who are you and what have you done with Mrs. Judd?

No, I don't make up facts as I go. I have lots of books in the room to check information if a student asks me something I'm not sure of. There's also the Internet, but I'm not ready to trust computer information all the time. Credentials? Besides the obvious English/Education major, I've been to Europe four times and have planned my trips according to the subject matter I teach. I've traveled to England four times and have seen most areas (my favorite section is the Lake District), Scotland twice, Wales twice, Ireland once, and twice each to France (Paris), Belgium (Brussels and Bruges), and The Netherlands (Amsterdam). My daughter and son-in-law, a native Scot, live in the Highlands, and they keep me informed on current events in the U.K. They also send British magazines, newspapers, and articles. In addition, I subscribe to In Britain, British Heritage, Scotland, and Ireland.

4. Tell me about British Literature. America won the war; shouldn't the British have to learn about us?

Actually, my son-in-law (he's lived in Scotland all his life) told me they studied lots of American authors in school. Of course the Scots aren't too fond of the English...

5. Do you find that speaking with a British accent and playing "God Save The Queen" helps immerse your Brit Lit. students?

I wish! Maybe I should hire a dialect coach. I wonder if I'd learn as fast as Madonna did?

6. Outside of Beatlemania, what do you believe England has to offer us?

I'm an acknowledged Anglophile. There's Shakespeare, of course, and there are all the great British writers. Besides the Beatles, there are lots of other great musical groups, plus many musicals that have come to Broadway from the West End in London. There are all the Merchant/Ivory films. Actors with delicious accents – Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton (I know, I'm dating myself), Judi Dench, Clive Owen. And what about Monty Python? If you actually visit Great Britain, the scenery is beautiful and the museums are fantastic!

7. With all the controversy around Modern Literature, how do you keep the students interested in the materials without the parents having you tarred and feathered?

I've been lucky. We require parental permission slips, and so far I haven't had any parents object to any books I've taken. The students I've had in class have been mature enough to handle any controversial ideas.

8. How do you decide which countries make the cut in World Literature? Who's hot and who's not?

When I planned the World Literature class, I decided to cut all American writers, as everyone is required to take two semesters of American Lit., and I only took two British authors, as students may select to take one or two semesters of British Lit. (I took Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and a book of Milton's Paradise Lost.) Other than that, I chose famous works not taken in other classes (Götzis, the Iliad, part of the Aeneid), various national epics (Chanson de Roland, part of the Nibelungenlied), and then just authors I like (Borges, Garcia Marquez, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Neruda). I made sure I chose some French, German, Spanish, and Japanese authors works, as those are the languages taught at Arrowhead.

9. Does your fiery red hair sometimes distract students?

Oh yes, I'm sure the hair distresses some (Okay, bad pun!). More distracting to some may be my stream-of-consciousness teaching style. I'd like to think it's from my Joycean roots, but maybe I do have ADD.

10. You have something of a reputation of being somewhat "riské." How do you explain your corruption of your students' fragile minds?
The authors are risqué, not me! Well, I guess I might have to admit to the occasional double-entendre. There was that rumor circulating about the stage name "Bubbles," too... As to "students' fragile minds," who is corrupting whom here?

11. A student throws his book to the ground, exclaiming "This is so dumb, we're never going to have to use any of this in real life!" Prove to this poor soul, without using violence, how wrong he is.

Everything you learn makes future learning easier. Who knows what experiences you'll have in the future? (Shame I can't throw the book back at the student though.)

12. When reading outside of class, do you find yourself gravitating toward certain genres or authors?

I love mysteries, especially police procedurals and historical types. I prefer a series to a single book because I like to watch the main characters develop. Right now my favorite author is Ian Rankin, whose detective is Edinburgh-based John Rebus. My kids sent me the newest one recently. Other authors I've enjoyed in the mystery genre include Lindsey Davis, Stephen Saylor, Boris Akunin, Elizabeth Peters, Barbara Gower Gill, Georges Simenon, Martha Grimes, Colin Dexter, Tony Hillerman, Alexander McCall Smith, Janwillem van de Wetering, Edmund Crispin, Ellis Peters, Janet Evanovich, Dorothy Sayers, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Outside that genre, some of my favorite authors are Julian Barnes, Erik Larson, Douglas Adams, and Neil Gaiman. I also enjoy biographies.

13. Tell our readers something they would be surprised to find out about you.

I'm afraid I can't think of anything titillating. No box of lento heels hidden in the back of a closet, no secret trips to rehab, no time spent as a Led Zeppelin groupie. I'm really pretty bloody boring. By the way, thirteen questions? My maiden name is Fishery! If I have bad luck, it's your fault, Sam!

Is Teaching for Me?
A Quest for Self-Preservation

By Carol Peronto

Ever since the fourth grade, when my teacher inspired me with humor and crazy stories, I've wanted to be a teacher, too. It was never the idea of having summers off that drove me to work hard in college and fill out endless scholarship, school of education, and job applications. Truly, it was the hope that I could help teenagers become awesome adults. I wanted to make a difference.

After surviving a year of student teaching with only a few classroom mishaps, I landed what a majority of new teachers would consider the perfect teaching position at an ideal school with the greatest kids. I would be a full-time English teacher at a suburban school that ranks high in academics and has a plethora of extra-curricular opportunities. After graduating from college, I ditched my almost-breakless Ford for a sporty Nissan Sentra and moved to a beautiful apartment only thirteen minutes from my new school. Life was going to be saa-weet.

So why, after only two years of teaching, do I feel I've been punked?

One word: parents. Parents can be bullies. I'd never seen the inside of a principal's office until I became a teacher, and I must say, I'd rather serve six Saturday detentions than see parents waiting in there for me again.

I guess I came out of college completely naïve about parent involvement, which I've always been an advocate for. I never actually thought parents would write their students' papers or make excuses for their students' obviously late work. After earning a Bachelor's Degree and well on my way to a Master's, I wouldn't have believed that some parents would tell me I'm not qualified to do my job.

What frustrates me the most is that some parents may not realize that, for me, teaching isn't only a job. It's a way of living. I wear my teacher clothes with pride. I definitely don't watch teen movies and read teen magazines because I think Zach Efron is cute. I want to find ways to grab my students' attention. And even though I may read a few steamy romance novels during my summers "off" for fun, they are always sandwiched between books on hot education topics.

I share my feelings not for pity but rather to create awareness. Teachers may have great health benefits and early retirement, but many also have high blood pressure, owe thousands in therapy bills, and spend more hours coaching after school and correcting papers than they do with their own families. Granted, not all teachers are stellar, just as not all
parents are ruthless, and I know we choose our profession, but I do encourage parents to turn their eyes away from the teacher and back to the kid before placing blame.

When faced with this sort of stress, every teacher has probably asked at some point: "When is enough enough?" I know I find myself looking for signs that indicate it's time to make a change. Is it after I've found gray hairs? When I've devoured all the chocolate in the house? Or do I really have to freak out Jerry Maguire-style and get myself fired to convince myself I'm done?

Though only some signs have flashed, "Run!" at me, I know in my heart it's not time to leave. Despite the challenges, I did miss the kids who hang out in my cubicle and those who yell, "Hey, Ms. P!" in the halls. And I'd really miss the moments when I see they've "gotten it." However, this doesn't rule out any future change. What I'm learning is it comes down to knowing my limits and valuing myself. And if I value myself, I'll be able to stick up for myself during the tough times and walk away when I've had enough. Most importantly, I'll be able to do this knowing I'm doing what's best for me. And that is okay.

The Forty-Year-Old Student Teacher

By Catherine Crucius

I was about to give up an established career in sales and a six-figure income that included a company car and every expense that went with it, an unlimited expense account for all travel, a limited expense account for gifts, lunches, dinners, and office supplies, and bi-monthly meetings in places such as Fort Lauderdale, Scottsdale, New Orleans, New York City, San Diego, Chicago, and Las Vegas, where we ordered expensive bottles of wine and "market price" meals. I felt both anxiety and relief at what I was about to do.

Big business disappointed me, and on a daily basis, I heard ethical laws breaking. It was time to give back to my community and pursuing a career in teaching would be a natural transition since I seemed to excel in managing and building relationships with my co-workers and customers. Because my undergraduate degree was in Communication Arts, I found it easy to act as the catalyst between my customer and company. Teaching would be just like a sales call, where the students acted as my customer and company. Teaching would be just like a sales call, where the students acted as my customer and company.

Through a public university, it would take me at least 2 1/2 years to complete an undergrad degree in Education. This was unacceptable, as I wanted to teach now, not in three years. Since I didn't relish the thought of starting completely over in college, I searched for and found a program that was custom made for someone in my situation. I stumbled across a private university's website that advertised programs for prospective teachers just like me, where everything could be accomplished within one year. The most intriguing part of the program was classes were graded as Pass or Fail. I couldn't believe this college wouldn't be giving me a letter grade.

At my old job, I received a spreadsheet every month that indicated my rank within the sales force. My company created a competition within itself to motivate its employees. Even though it took me a long time, I eventually learned to accept that it wasn't me against the twelve other students in the program. In contrast to sales people, I found my peers and all of the teachers that I worked with to be some of the most generous people I have ever met as we shared lesson plans, strategies, and ideas with each other.

It was obvious from my transcripts that I would become an English teacher. I earned an undergrad degree in Liberal Arts in the '80s, so I needed to study a few subjects that I hadn't taken the first time I went through college. I was nervous my first day back to school. The first time I walked into my Grammar class, I didn't know what to expect, nor did I understand what was expected of me. Maybe it was because I was the oldest.
but I was aghast when I saw students with multiple piercings, tattoos, and wearing clothes that were at least a size too small. But I was shocked back into reality when asked to define different types of verbs. So, I took out my notebook and started wracking my brain to remember what a "gerund" was. Wasn't this something we covered in 8th grade? I felt like I was in a time machine.

What helped me to get through it was my professor. She was so enthralled with the content. Every semester she had a contest to determine the "Grammar Goddess," and the competition was fierce. Her enthusiasm for a boring topic was infectious and taught me how to transfer that enthusiasm to my own lesson plans. I also studied Shakespeare, and my professor lived and died with British literature. He was seriously into reading, dissecting, and then discussing exactly what the author must have thought while writing his plays. His passion for the written word of the 17th century was obvious, and he wanted us to feel the emotion that he did. He made me realize that a teacher's interest level and knowledge of a subject was crucial when trying to get a group of students to buy into his ideas.

The classes I took to earn my teaching license were graduate level courses that were difficult for the back-to-school student, especially if that student had been gone for twenty years. The program was designed to accommodate the professional who was continuing to work while going back to school. Therefore, the classes lasted four hours each Friday night and continued for another four hours on Saturday every other weekend. I didn't know that I could get so tired from sitting. The amount of reading was huge, and the preparation needed for lessons seemed overwhelming. Usually, I was still reading or typing fifteen minutes before leaving for class. My husband learned NOT to ask me what was for dinner on those evenings. What we studied was theoretical, and since I had no experience to relate to, complete comprehension was difficult. I hoped it would all make sense once I started teaching.

For three semesters, I participated in fieldwork at two middle schools and one high school. I finally interacted with kids. I wanted to watch the proverbial light bulb go off above their heads and know it was all because of me. Mostly, I sat in the back of the room for two hours a day and observed the interaction between teacher and students. The amount of energy and patience shown with students was amazing. I learned that these two qualities were something that I was going to have to develop in order to succeed. I also realized I was going to have to keep an open mind to what students were wearing and saying. When did "dude" become a catchphrase? Once the culture shock wore off, I concentrated on getting to know what high school seniors were all about. I discovered that most of them had a great sense of humor and tried their best to be responsible for themselves. They took school seriously, but their social lives were just as important to maintain as grades. The fact that the students didn't hang on my every word boggled my mind. I was the teacher, after all. Kids didn't pass notes anymore rather they spoke openly and right in front of me, and NOT about the book we were reading. They easily pulled me off task and I found myself sanding confused in front of a room of 17-year-olds who got the best of me. This is when I knew that I was going to have to incorporate classroom management strategies.

It finally all began to click when I started to student teach. The theories made sense, the strategies implemented, and that proverbial light bulb went off above a head, my own. I strongly believe this was because I found a mentor in my cooperating teacher. He took the time to explain why to me. For instance, I learned why I needed to balance the reading, writing, and grammar parts of the grade book, why backward design is important when designing a unit, why students need a model of everything I assign them, why it's important to build trust with all students, and why I need a sense of humor when interacting with 14-year-olds. I became conscious of my age when I saw people look twice when introducing myself as a student teacher. At the high school's open house during the first week of school, I overheard a father say, "he found it difficult to believe that he [my cooperating teacher] had to work with a woman all day." I immediately blushed because I am known for being bossy.

At first, I felt guilty about always taking. I was constantly asking questions, requesting explanations, and then asking him to rephrase again when I still didn't get it. But I found that great teachers like to talk about their craft. He was a natural teacher and thrived on kids' understanding. Even though he claimed to be retiring within the next few years, he continued to strive for excellence as there were always "How to" books on teaching, motivation, and the P134 legislation lying around. In fact, he helped me to write my first PDP and acted as a mentor for at least two other new teachers within the school. I felt fortunate to spend the entire semester at the same placement rather than switch after nine weeks as most schools do. At the halfway point, I was finally starting to "get it." Just as I found a good groove, I was able to continue with the same kids with a newfound confidence. I spoke with more authority, evaluated essays with a better understanding, alleviated my need to edit every kid's paper, and learned to use other teachers, staff, and administrators as resources.

Even though I was a bit nervous about knowing everything in the English curriculum, I felt confident in the rapport that I was able to build with students of all ages. I liked listening to them, discovering what was important to them, and finding out about their lives. I realized that I liked the same TV shows, music, books, movies, and pop culture they did. Yet as soon as I thought I had earned their respect and made inroads with them, I was reminded that I had not gone as far as I had thought. One senior girl expressed her interest in me. George Clooney voted sexiest man alive because he was "so old." This was where the sense of humor came in.
People told me they thought I had courage to do what I did. I figured I had to work for at least the next 15 years, and I had better enjoy what I was doing. Sales wasn’t an option anymore. I loved being with children, and I thought I had a lot to offer the next generation. I had been “out there” where I had succeeded and failed, traveled the world, felt the pressure, faced consequences, and wanted to help students see the importance of studying and questioning literature while I passed on my enthusiasm for reading. I wanted to be the kind of teacher who searched for the potential that was in every child until I found it. It was not all fun and games, for I experienced for the first time the ungratefulness and indifference of a student who achieved higher than he would have because I sat next to him and explained in great detail what he needed to write. As a coach last fall, I found myself in situations where impressionable young ladies were watching for my reaction to an irate woman taking her frustrations out on me and having to demonstrate good sportsmanship in adverse situations. It became crystal clear that teachers go into teaching because they love it. Acclades weren’t needed. Teachers were genuinely concerned with these young citizens of tomorrow and where their lives would take them.

Deciding to give up the “good life” was the easy part. After finishing student teaching, I felt as prepared as I could be and ready to leave the nest. I started living my life at the mercy of a bell that rings every 40 minutes, driving my old Ford pickup, paying for my own vacations, and looking for the same freebies I used to give out like candy. Yet I couldn’t be happier. My only regret is that I have not yet convinced the girls to stop wearing flip-flops in winter.

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How To Spend Your Summer Vacation: Teaching Abroad

By Emma Smurr and Laura Bauer, student editors for the Arrowhead newspaper Smoke Signal

Note: David Watry, Chairman of the Language Arts Department at Arrowhead has taught in St. Petersburg, Russia; Arusha, Tanzania; and for the past four summers at the Lithuanian Christian College in Klaipeda, Lithuania. This story captures his first summer there in 2003. Since then, he and his wife, who teaches first grade in Pewaukee, have spent the month of July teaching ESL and teaching methods to Eastern European university, high school and elementary teachers. They pay for their entire trip. If interested in teaching abroad, contact Watry at his e-mail—watry@ahs.k12.wi.us

“It takes about three times the energy to live in a foreign culture than here,” said Mr. David Watry, Arrowhead English teacher, of his summer trip to Lithuania. “You always have to be thinking.”

This past summer, Watry, along with his wife Jude and daughter Becka, traveled to Klaipeda, Lithuania in Europe on a mission trip to teach at Lithuanian Christian College (LCC). Watry and his wife taught English As A Second Language to students from several different countries. After one week of training, Watry said he sort of went blindly into teaching the class, not knowing what to expect.

About 268 students, ranging in both age and level of English competence, enrolled in summer school at LCC, said Watry. He said he taught the most advanced English speakers, reading with them books such as Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal and John Steinbeck’s Travels with Charlie. “I was really surprised at their level of expertise at the English language,” Watry said. His class was able to have detailed discussions on such readings as Gary Desoto’s
"Oranges." On the other hand, Watry stated his wife taught a much more challenged class, with one 60-year-old man reading "Mickey Mouse’s Rainy Day Parade." However, Watry said all students worked very hard, keeping in mind the school’s mantra "English is a universal language."

Watry said the biggest difference between Arrowhead students and Lithuanian students was their appreciation for learning. Students actually wanted to go to school in the summer, not for the grade, but truly to gain knowledge, said Watry. He stated that in 102º weather students worked diligently for six hours a day at school, and then stayed up late doing further homework for four or five hours a night, all without a single complaint. "It’s fun to work with people who really want to learn something," Watry said.

Klaipeda, about half the geographical size of Waukesha, was a "very nice place." Watry said, "I felt at home after about two days." He said the people were very accepting, treating him "like royalty" after discovering he taught at the school. Watry mentioned how polite the Lithuanians were. "You could stop anyone on the street and talk.

Despite the inviting people, the difficulty of living in a foreign culture still remained. "You can’t be afraid of making mistakes," Watry said.

According to him, it took a lot of thinking to simply get home. "I felt strange," Watry said of his bus ride home, not knowing how to communicate with the driver. "I played this little game... I’d get off with anyone getting off close to my house." Also, buying the usual groceries was a whole different story. Watry said all the groceries he could carry was limited to the one bag he had to bring along from home.

Watry also mentioned that he had to think of how much money was in his pocket at all times. When he would get money out of the ATM, the grocery store or bus wouldn’t be able to break the big bills he received. "You can’t just say...oh, I’ll use my credit card," Watry said.

Fortunately, according to Watry, everything cost about five times less than in the United States. That meant he could eat out for almost every meal. He said his most expensive meal was just $4. In fact, he said his entire month in Lithuania cost him only around $750—including food, housing, and transportation in the country. Life in Lithuania, according to Watry, is much different from life in the U.S. For example, instead of watching TV, his family would go to the beach or sit in the outdoor cafes and enjoy conversation.

"(In America), the phone starts ringing and you have appointments with doctors. Those sorts of things start to take over your life," he said. He added, "We didn’t have to get home for ‘the Bachelorette’…we filled our life with other stuff."

His positive experience in Lithuania added to Watry’s ambition to retire and teach abroad full-time. He said he plans to possibly return to Lithuania in the future. "You get to a certain point in your life... you have everything you need, so you want to give back what was given to you."

When you think about Russia, what comes to mind? When asked this question, a few students thought of things like World War II, communism, Joseph Stalin, and the animated film Anastasia.

In reality, Russia is "a whole world about which most foreigners have only a vague imagination," according to Galena Lapinski, the deputy editor and manager of translation for My Ussurisk, a book that recollects unforgettable moments in the lives of people who live there. She hopes to educate people all around the world through a unique humanitarian project that will exhibit the "real" Russia.

"So many people judge Russia knowing only Moscow and St. Petersburg," Lapinski said. This project aims to go beyond the stereotypes and tap into the thoughts, dreams, and hearts of a variety of Russian citizens.

Emma Smurr and Lindsey Roeker, two Arrowhead juniors, became involved in this project by helping edit the book. Lapinski contacted Mr. Dave Watry, English and Journalism teacher, via e-mail. Watry learned about the project through a colleague at the Lithuanian Christian College, where he teaches during the summer. He recruited the two girls to edit about 500 stories over the course of their sophomore year.

Russians of all ages from the town Ussurisk, which is located in Eastern Russia, wrote these short accounts about important factors of their lives and what their "Motherland" means to them. These stories were then translated into English and sent to Smurr and Roeker for further revisions and editing by native English speakers.

By reading these stories, the girls have been given an exclusive
opportunity to come into such close contact with the way people in Russia live their lives. Roeker noted the “loyalty that’s overwhelmingly present” in all of their stories. “They pledge so much to their country at such a young age. In our country we don’t tend to do that unless there is something that moves us to, such as 9/11,” she said. “Years of repression have really made them understand their freedom today.”

Smurr and Roeker worked on the stories during study halls and at home. Lapinski would send about thirty or so stories at a time.

“I tried to make the stories easier to read, but also make sure they didn’t lose their voice,” Emma said. “I almost liked the stories better before they were edited—they were so honest and endearing compared to how Americans would write.”

“I give these girls a lot of credit,” Watry said. “Their deadlines started when they received the emails. They could get five stories—or they could get fifty. They spent hours reading, revising, and discussing each story so it wouldn’t lose its original meaning.”

Lapinski expressed her gratitude for all of their help through many emails. “She even invited me to come visit her in Russia,” Smurr said.

This January, a package arrived at Arrowhead containing the impressive finished product—a glossy, full-color, hardcover, 284-page book. A week later, two more arrived so that Smurr, Roeker, and Watry could each have a copy. “It was exciting to see it all come together,” Roeker said. “It turned out even better than I thought it would.”

The huge book features incredible photographs, artwork, and a split layout with the Russian text on one side and the English translation on the other. “With our own understanding, we would like to tell the world about us,” Lapinski said. “That is why we issue our books in two languages.”

A “kaleidoscope of faces and streets” portrays a clear image of Ussurisk. “The town has its own rhythm of life and its own character,” declared Lapinski. “It is impossible to confuse it with anything or anywhere else.”

Sergey P. Ruditsa, a city official, commented on his wishes for the future of his Motherland. “In rare moments of solitude, calm, and peace, when I am alone in the country, I often fancy Ussurisk’s future. I wish to create conditions for my compatriots so the words ‘I am from Ussurisk!’ are full of pride,” he wrote. “This book is the realized dream.”

Lapinski invites you to “turn over the pages and have a look into the eyes of those who remain—in the form of memoirs, a picture, or a photo. This is Russia of which we can be proud.”

Word of the Day for Vocabulary Improvement

By Kathy Nelson

Lorna Collier’s “Effective Vocabulary Instruction” in the March 2007 issue of The Council Chronicle affirmed my practices for improving students’ vocabulary. I agree that reading most effectively enhances vocabulary, but I want to share another strategy I’ve found effective. For a number of years, I have started my Advanced Composition classes and, more recently, my honors English classes with a short “Word of the Day” activity. Each day, a different student teaches an assigned word to their classmates. We start at one side of the room and move around the rows so everyone recalls who is assigned each day. At first, I used the Merriam-Webster Home Page as a source of words. The assigned student retrieved the word from www.m-w.com’s “Word of the Day.” Then, they prepared a 3-5 minute lesson over the next 24 hours with a goal of making the word memorable for their classmates. I model a word presentation the first week of class, and the practice continues with each student presenting about three times per semester. Currently, we take our words from American Heritage’s 100 Words Every High School Graduate Should Know. I’ve been amazed at just how creative and memorable students have made their words. I quiz students on their recall of the words every six weeks and am impressed how much better this system works than my old method of distributing and quizzesing students on a list of words.
If Sandra Bullock Can Have a Dress Rehearsal, I Want One, Too

By Michelle Verkler

I’ve always been a pushover for those feel-good education movies. You know what I’m talking about—the movies where the hopelessly devoted teacher is determined to get his or her class to realize their potential. Perhaps part of me believed that reaching at-risk learners would be Hollywood easy. Within two months, I would create unbreakable bonds with my students and motivate them to be motivated. After five months of teaching in an at-risk classroom, I realize that my screenplay will be much longer than two hours.

When the opportunity to teach an at-risk class arrived, I jumped right in; in fact, I volunteered. After exclusively teaching freshmen classes for about six years, I needed a change. This would be a sophomore at-risk class with a new curriculum. I was actually quite excited about trying something different. As I was jumping in, I must have been over-exuberant, as I did not land on my feet. It was more like an ankle and a toe. I encountered more obstacles than I thought I would.

The first obstacle to finding success with this group was delving into the sophomore curriculum and planning appropriate lessons for them. Before solely teaching at the freshmen level, I did have sophomore classes and felt comfortable with the curriculum; however, without knowing the kids, it was difficult to plan for them. This particular group had a reputation for not completing homework. How was I going to motivate them to prepare speeches and read entire novels? I discussed the possibilities with their freshmen teacher, but without having first-hand experience with the kids, I could only create a generic skeleton of ideas.

Another obstacle was motivation. I had grand ideas of being the “it” teacher for these kids. I wanted them to love coming through my classroom door, motivated to learn. Now it was the time I would expect you to laugh at me. After the first week, I laughed at myself. These students didn’t need an “it” teacher; they needed a cowboy—a teacher with a lasso. Since, I have no experience working a lasso, I needed to find a way to reach them with the resources I had…J.D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye. I was saved. Surely this book would motivate the students to read. My moment of educational glory lasted roughly one week. Soon my students surprised me with their dislike of the book. They thought Holden was weird and didn’t care about what happened to him. Because of their strong aversion to the novel, at least I know they won’t soon forget it.

As the semester wore on, my frustration grew. The combination of students made for a unique class personality. My classroom became divided between the students who were there to better themselves and those who just wanted to pass. I was beginning to burn out; I had never been so tired and discouraged at this point in the school year. At the same time, my desire to “fix” the kids became stronger as I spent more time with them. So, I decided to feed them. My idealism kicked in again; I had a romanticized notion that I would feed them, and we would become one cohesive unit. They loved it, and I have to admit that I enjoyed nourishing them with Grandma’s barbeque recipe. However, now I had 24 kids who expected me to cook for them on a weekly basis—not happening.

I am writing this at the end of the first semester. My kids have taken their final, the same final that the rest of the sophomores take. My kids did not blow me away with their grammar or writing skills. As a class, they scored average on the reading comprehension. We consider that a success.

As I look ahead to second semester, I have hope. With a new novel and ideas for incorporating grammar and writing, I am starting to reenergize. Along with this energy, I feel idealistic. My kids will love Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. They will feed off my energy and will connect to this literary masterpiece. They will improve their grammar and writing skills. They will love English class, and their motivation to learn will spill over to their other classes. Sandra Bullock will play me in the movie…okay, I’m getting ahead of myself again. I will take one 84-minute class period at a time; however, I will keep my expectations high for my students as well as for me. Who knows what we will be able to achieve by the end of the year? Together, we’ll find the answer.
Creative Writing for 12th Graders: A Plan of Action

By Liz Jorgenson

Example I: Primary Sources

He’s seen a Fear Factor-esque bug-eating contest, lives of prisoners and the life of an elderly woman. Every day, he drives around the Milwaukee metropolitan area, hearing stories and talking to strangers. And he is paid by the word to do it. He is Crocker Stephenson, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter and a celebrity to each of my 75 students.

Each student is assigned an Interview Piece, based on Stephenson’s “Snapshots” column in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and Steve Hartman’s “Everywhere Has a Story” segments on CBS. Students first learn about interviewing techniques from Oprah (check out her DVD set). Then, they read Stephenson articles and hear advice from Stephenson himself (see Stephenson for speaking appointments). Students then practice interviewing me.

Finally, students go out into the community and conduct a primary source interview. They are encouraged to talk to each other and see the practicality in primary sources (a grandfather who was in a concentration camp during World War II, an aunt who is an alderwoman, etc.). They learn to use interview techniques and proper citation form in this audience-appropriate assignment.

Example II: Vocabulary

Students learn, understand, and use ten new words each week. To aid in student achievement, I assign simple competition-focused activities. Throughout the semester, each student presents three vocabulary words. To receive all the points, each presentation must include the use of media, two visual aids, the word in use, and examples of where the word can be found.

Spelling Bees, Pictionary, and charades encourage vocabulary word use and review for an exam. However, after more audience analysis, I found that a tired and over-booked group will simply memorize the definitions moments before the quiz. To prohibit such behavior, they take quizzes in composition format. The day of the quiz, students receive a prompt and the ten words. Each student has forty minutes to write an essay using the words. Not only must students understand the meaning, they also have to know how the words are used. The format also allows them to practice impromptu writing.

Example III: Publication

In creative writing, every word and every sentence has a purpose. The purpose, however, should be more than getting a certain grade. Each class assignment is based on a writer’s market. When students sit down to compose, they are writing for an actual audience. It becomes, with each assignment, less and less about the grade and more and more about being a published writer. They learn about these possible markets for their writing:

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (Question of the Week, Voices column and My Wisconsin)
- New Times – San Luis Obispo (SS Fiction)
- Teen Ink (Educator of the Year)
- Teaching Tolerance (Mix it Up)
- Inside Wisconsin Sports (annual high school contest)
- National Mustard Museum (writing contest)

Arrowhead High School Literary Magazine (each semester, with the help of our school’s literary journal, virtually every student has been able to add ‘published writer’ to college applications, résumés and personal accolades)

Conclusion:

Know your audience and you will abolish senioritis. Know your audience and you will succeed.

Emphasize personal responsibility, accountability and performance, and constant monitoring, checking and nagging will become a thing of the past.
Tackling the Standards:
An Arrowhead Profession

By David Watry, Language Arts Chairperson

About 10 years ago, Dan Rosa, a colleague and friend of mine who teaches Physics at Arrowhead, thought it would be a good idea find a practical way to merge the Wisconsin State Standards and teachers. We knew the theory behind using the standards. But we also knew that to get teachers to actually use the standards, the teachers needed to be connected to the standards on a daily basis.

Dan knew how to use Access, a Microsoft database, and I had some ideas. By putting our heads together, we developed what is now called the Language Arts database, a system to track standards and assessments in the classroom.

To start we needed assessments, what was in the grade book, to the standards. We used InterGradePro, a computer grade book already familiar to all AHS staff members. During our in-service department meeting, I asked the staff to return Task Types in the grading program, default to homework, quiz and tests, to the six Language Arts Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking, Language, Media and Research (see Figure 1).

By the end of the year, most teachers were familiar with these six standards. The first step was done: getting the teachers to correlate the standards to assessments being used in their grade books. [Note: Renaming the tasks played a communication role when we started using Parent Connect this past year] Like the movie Where's Bob, we took baby steps.

Figure 1: Connecting Standards to Integrating Pro Gradebook

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<th>Task Name</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Out Of</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Class Mean</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Grammar/paradigm</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Grammar/paragraph</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Punctuation</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
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<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>80</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
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30
A Tasty Method
For Evaluating Writing

By Frank Balistreri

Writing is a weird thing to teach. I mean: if Poe was a good writer and if Hemingway was a good writer, if Toni Morrison is good, and Sandra Cisneros is good, then what does “good” mean? How can we teach writing if we don’t know exactly what good writing is? How can we evaluate it? Beyond undaunting their participles and making their elements parallel, how can we make people better writers without a solid standard of excellence?

After rereading my first paragraph, I’m pretty sure I know what good writing isn’t. It isn’t a bunch of rhetorical questions. Still, as a veteran of 30 years celebrating the piquant and muddling through the mediocrities, I’m pretty sure I know what good writing is and how to teach and evaluate it.

Consider an hors d’oeuvre table at a party. As I graze, I first come upon a plate of soggy Ritz festooned with Cheese Whiz. There’s nothing good about it. The cheese is pliny, the cracker is limp—it doesn’t even feel good, much less satisfy me. I move on to some rusty celery. You know, somebody cut it up at a factory and it started going brown as soon as the bag was opened. Not much TLC there. Next there’s one of those cold veggie and cream cheese “pizzas.” Well, veggie are good. Wait, here’s another one; it’s from Sentry, not from the Piggly Wiggly, but it’s nearly the same. Hey, it looks like Red Owl makes veggie pizzas, too, and here’s one from Pick ’n Save!

It doesn’t matter to me if the table is set beautifully. It’s boring! Heck, I’d hardly care if the potato chips were next to the brownies as long as the chips were crisp and the brownies had raspberries in them.

The next party, I start out with a bleu cheese-stuffed date. Wow! I’m not even sure if I like it, but I want to try another one and find out. What’s this next stuff? Some kind of Italian eggplant, onions, capers, tomatoes, raisins (raisins?) and olive relish served on little crusts of garlic bread. This is a great party! These little grape tomatoes are good by themselves. Do I see water chestnuts wrapped in bacon on the horizon? What’s in these crab cakes? Pickapeppa Sauce? Hey, chocolate-covered pear slices! I’m in heaven! I don’t care if they’re odd, put soup on the appetizer table. Everything is interesting.

The implication? We should care less about how writers set the table and more about how appetizing their sentences are. I’ve made the mistake. I used to tell them, “Write six paragraphs,” and I got six paragraphs of soggy Ritz. Now I judge the writing based on how worthwhile each sentence is.

Now don’t be silly. Don’t shout indignantly, “He doesn’t care about organization. He let’s them randomly throw things together.” I love paragraph! Look how many I’ve written already. Obviously, my AP students have to write cogent, pithy theses and then defend them with their last breaths.

However, it’s the sentences that we nosh on. We start at a capital letter and chew on the ideas until we hit the end punctuation. Then, we decide whether we want to swallow it. So what makes a sentence worth masticating? Here:

It’s specific. No “He was ugly.” Give me “He had a pimple on his earlobe.”

It’s as brief as it can be. No wrestling with five layers of plastic before we get to the Lunchables.

It’s not repetitive. Even in the conclusion, we should find new wonders. It possibly freaks us out. The readers laugh, or cry, or say, “Oooh!”

We haven’t read it a dozen times before.

It’s genuine to the discussion. The writer somehow convinces us that he or she cared about that sentence.

If the tidbits are tasty, organizing them into the most logical order and groups might actually be fun. Fretting over, “Should I put the stale Oreos before or after the cold French fries?” makes composition seem pointless. So we teachers need to evaluate essays in such a way as to encourage great sentences. Here’s what I do:

Assign maximums. Tell them they may only write a page or two pages. Tell them you won’t read the third page. Their sentences had better be worthwhile if they want to score any points.

Use points as rewards for each good sentence. Start at an “F” and add points for each time they give a specific insight or use appropriate evidence or simply amaze you. When grading a two-page paper, I often start at 50 and give +3 for each of the things I want. For an essay, I’ll reward

- a specific thesis,
- each insight backing up the thesis,
- each piece of evidence supporting the thesis
- and any beautiful, deep, sad, funny or provocative sentence that doesn’t fit in the other categories.

For creative writing, I’ll give +3 for each detail, or maybe each metaphor or metonymy, depending on my goal for the assignment.

Use negative points to discourage not only bad grammar and usage but also vague, repetitive, or incorrect assertions. Of course, I’ll take off three points for each grammar mistake, but I’ll also take off for wandering from the topic, or getting a fact wrong. Vague sentences don’t score points; so, with the limit in length, they effectively lower the grade. (Often, especially early in the semester, a whole paragraph will score
Before I introduced this database to my department, I tried using it for one year and debugged flaws in the working program. During that year, I kept the teachers updated on my progress with the database during our monthly department meetings. By second semester, some of the teachers were willing to also experiment with it. Of course, some teachers wanted to know why we needed to do this. And instead of me answering that question, other teachers, the ones who asked to use it, thought it was a good idea. In other words, I really didn't have to defend it. It just caught on. Looking back, I think the success was due to taking it slowly, not forcing teachers to use it and spending time during meetings to actually do work.

Making the Database Work
My background work with assessments nudged me towards Stiggins' backwards design. Starting with the common final exams in grade groups, we tackled aligning the standards to the exams. Once this work had been accomplished, Dan and I input the data into our newly designed database for a test run. Our common finals were in the core classes: English 9, English 10 and English 11. [Since then, we have developed common finals for any course taught by more than one teacher] Again, we started small. When I was finally ready to introduce all the teachers to the database, this work would already be input and assigned to their names and courses. Then, I started using the database in my classes. Ideally, the backwards design should be used again. So, before I taught a new unit, I opened the database, named the assessment that correlated to the grade book, and assigned standards I wanted to assess the assignment. It actually worked quite well and took minimal time. The more I worked with it, the better I got to know where and what standards I wanted to measure (see Figure 2). Once the information was input, it was saved and only needed to be updated. Therefore, I went back to the database after each unit to see if I assessed what I intended. I tried to assign 4-6 standards per assessment.

Figure 2: Entering Standards Into the Database

Again, while I was working on the database, my teachers were breaking the Language Arts Standards into specific grade levels. We chose certain standards to be taught at the 9th grade and 10th grade. This made it easier to assign standards to 9th grade courses. By the end of the year, I had a printout correlating my assessments in my grade book to the Wisconsin State Language Arts Standards [see Figure 3].

Figure 3: Database Printout

Designing and implementing this database was not an overnight process. From design to implementation, it took 4-5 years. Today, all Language Arts teachers use it. Each year, they print out their assessments correlated to their databases. They are able to use the database with supervisor observations, parents and students. The database came in real handy when our school went through a book banning. Our defense was the Wisconsin State Standards correlated to the books we were teaching [See related article in this issue by Donna Smith]. The department was able to learn how to use this program together. It's easily accessible on our school's server space.
Advocates for Social Justice: Advanced Composition at Arrowhead High School

By Liz Jorgenson

Famous Social Justice Advocates:
P. Diddy, Bono, Shelby Knox

Vehicles for Social Justice: Rap Music, Red Inspi(red) T-Shirts, Indie Films


At Arrowhead High School in Hartland, Wisconsin, Advanced Composition classes combine the development of writing skills with an exploration of social justice. We take our current curricular goal, including the state standards, and add a few of our own: social justice, awareness and compassion.

At University of Wisconsin-Madison, Freshman English courses assign an advocacy letter. Our high school course follows suit, preparing our student not only for college assignments but also for adapting and understanding different writing purposes and styles. Students are instructed to write a one-page letter to a person in authority. Their goal is to inspire or encourage change on a social justice issue. The topic must be personal and local. Realistically, the students always agree, change is not going to occur on the death penalty or abortion from a one-page letter.

Beyond learning what advocacy and social justice are, students are asked to research famous advocates. The range is astounding: P. Diddy and Vote or Die, Bono with Red and One campaigns and Shelby Knox and her drive for comprehensive sex education (she's the high school student in Texas who the documentary The Education of Shelby Knox follows).

With research, students begin to see social justice is more than the dated, crinkled, battered, and often times ignored history in textbooks. Social justice is present in their lives: rap music, the Red inspi(red) t-shirt and indie films.

Slowly, students realize they too are advocates for social justice. Sometimes it's for themselves (composing college application), sometimes it is for others (helping a friend in need) and sometimes it's for the world (completing service trips with National Honors Society).

We brainstorm topics. Students share passions and issues begin to unfold. One student wrote to the bus company. Result: a change in the bus route mid year. Another student wrote to the ACT. Result: a refund for a distraction at the test center. More students wrote to the principal and superintendent. Result: meetings and adult conversations, which exposed a different point of view, and taught
Students walk away from the unit knowing more than the basics of advocating; students learn business-letter form, persuasive writing and how to research local issues. Further, students are forced to understand audience and write for an actual purpose. At the end of the unit, students are eager to write more letters. They want to continue to inspire change within the community.

As letters are sent off, and students eagerly await responses, the class shifts to a shared passion: television, video games, advertisements, and Abercrombie and Fitch catalogs.

First, students learn new media based language (dismemberment, gaze, construction, subtexts, power dynamics, language of persuasion, etc.) and then learn about the impact media has on assumptions, emotions and actions.

After reading articles, understanding vocabulary and discussing the social impact, we take to the television. Students (after we have modeled it in class) watch a 30-minute primetime television show (like the Simpsons or Friends) and write an analytical paper.

Race, gender, class, socioeconomic status, age. Students interpret and analyze assumptions and -isms within the shows. Students use vocabulary words and textual evidence to back up the thesis. They too start to understand what they see everyday within television, video games, advertisements and Abercrombie and Fitch catalogs: the creators of media messages, the hidden messages, the

As the semester ends, students are asked to expose an issue their classmates need to know about. As an example, information is presented on Fair Trade coffee. A college paper is examined and facts and data on the Fair Trade industry are exposed. Then the talk about why Starbucks doesn’t offer a variety of Fair Trade options. We discuss about how this impacts the economy and people of the world. In doing so, students are exposed to an issue they were (for the most part) unaware of. Slowly, they are convinced, through research and data, they need to know about Fair Trade.

The expose paper is a research paper, but the students don’t see it as such. Because of the previous social justice themed activities and assignments, each student’s passion for equity, tolerance and justice has been building. Each student has a passion for at least one issue and each student has something they want to expose to their classmates.

Through interactive activities, anticipation guides, dense questioning and classroom discussions, students have become more than comfortable expressing opinions and differing views. By the last month of the school year, each advanced composer (as I affectionately call the members of my Advanced Composition course), are eager to take the classroom stage for 10 minutes and both expose a burning social issue and convince their classmates to change current practices.

Topics for papers and subsequent presentations always vary: the cheerleaders at our school are forced to practice in the foyer; district mothers wear blood diamonds; the sports drinks we consume actually don’t aid in athletic performance.

In the end, students walk away knowing how to write a research paper, how to speak persuasively and how to target a large, and primarily uneducated audience.

This is not your average high school composition course. At Arrowhead High School in Hartland, WI, teachers are instructing on more than adverbs, appositive phrases and literary analysis. My colleagues and I tackle a comprehensive, enlightening and challenging social curriculum. At the forefront, standing near sentence structure and pronoun agreement, are social justice, advocacy and human rights.

Advanced composers will not pass if they haven’t learned more about themselves and the world. Within the next few years we hope to add at least a couple hundred names to the list of social advocates.

**New social advocates:** Arrowhead High School students.

**Vehicles for social justice:** advocacy letters, media analysis papers, and expose presentations.

**Not-so-famous social justice advocates:** today’s high school teachers.
Surviving a Book Challenge: Defending the Right to Read
By Donna Smith, Arrowhead High School North Campus Librarian

Approximately 200 students, stickered with the slogans “Save Perks” and “Reading Promotes Thought,” assembled with parental permission in the school theater along with concerned members of the community, school board members, and reporters to attend a hearing that would determine the fate of a book.

But this day was neither the beginning nor the end of the long battle to keep The Perks of Being a Wallflower in the Modern Literature course at Arrowhead High School. The beginning was when parents of a student in English teacher Frank Balistreri’s class informedly communicated their displeasure to Superintendent Dave Lodes in the spring of 2004 regarding a book being taught in that elective class to their then-senior son. The parents also spread their concern to the English teacher, the English department chair, and the local conservative talk radio host/newspaper columnist Mark Belling. Belling then wrote a column placing his spin on the situation that was then published in a local newspaper (Waukesha Freeman 3/17/04). The boy, who was home schooled until his junior year, was given an alternative reading assignment in place of The Perks of Being a Wallflower, and the son graduated, and parents were not heard from through the duration of the summer.

When the parents discovered the book was still being taught in the Modern Literature course in the fall of 2004, they filled out a formal complaint. The requirement of this complaint involved little more than filling in blanks for the book’s title and author and answering an open-ended question regarding the problem with the book. The parents, however, were kind enough to expand on our form in the composition of a letter complete with quotes and page numbers. In accordance with our policy, this letter was delivered to the library media specialist at the opposite campus of where the book was taught (South Campus).

After receiving the letter, some time was spent sorting through our policies and procedures. Before being challenged, these official publications are merely a safeguard in the unlikely event that a school might receive a challenge to any teaching materials. But challenges are more commonplace today than ever, and these are the official documents, as we found out, that will protect the materials in our schools. Arrowhead’s policies and procedures were convoluted at best, and would be revised before the next challenge was attempted.

stressed discussing how the book fits in with our state standards and told the instructor to avoid defining terms such as vulgar, because everyone’s definition of that and other such terms would be different.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin (ACLU http://www.aclu-wi.org/) helped with the legal aspects of the defense. Larry Dupuis, the legal director, gave us court cases and legal requirements. He faxed and sent undisputable and well-researched letters, both before and after the hearing and spent countless time on the phone with me.

Parents, students, and other educators were very helpful as well. The students, who attended the hearing with parental permission, met many times before the official meeting. Other AHS graduates who had taken Modern Literature wrote letters and sent emails regarding the importance of this book and the Modern Literature class. Parents and community members also offered their support by attending meetings both before and after the hearing. UW-Whitewater Information Technology professors, Eileen Schroeder and Anne Zarinaia, offered their guidance and support.

Finally, in preparing the defense I attempted to locate the author. This was not an easy feat. I was able to contact another author who knew Stephen Chbosky and gave me his email address. Generally, authors are contacted after a book is banned, so Chbosky was thrilled to be able to defend his book. I sent the letter from the challengers to him, and he wrote a letter countering each point that the challengers made. Chbosky’s letter was then admitted at the hearing in defense of the book.

The challenge’s letter and the sources that they referenced, such as http://www.pabibs.com and http://www.sibbap.org, helped clarify the nature of the challenge. We were able to understand where the challengers were coming from and better prepare our defense. Other websites, such as the National Coalition Against Censorship (http://www.naac.org) and court cases gave teeth to our stand on the book.

After collecting all of this information and meeting several times with the defense team, which consisted of the English department chair, the classroom teacher, two community members and parents of former Modern Literature students, and me (the North Campus librarian), we finally all congregated in the North Campus Theater for the reconsideration meeting.

After what seemed like hours of deliberating in a silent theater, the reconsideration committee decided to keep the book in the curriculum. At first, there was a restrictive clause, which discussed keeping the book out of the hands of south campus (9th and 10th grade) students or using some sort of parental permission form to read the book. This was immediately refuted. When the committee decided to keep The Perks of Being a Wallflower in the curriculum, it thereby rendered the book “educationally sound,” which means, a school district may not remove or limit school library access to it (Counts vs. Cedarville, Case v.

The only recommendation that the committee ultimately gave was to make sure that there was clear communication among the instructors, the students, and the students' parents or guardians. This recommendation was passed to the school board, and by a narrow vote of five to three, the school board voted to support the reconsideration committee in their decision.

There were a lot of negative results of this entire process. Educators spent a lot of time and energy defending the book and preparing for the hearing. This time was taken, physically and emotionally, from teaching. Allegedly, there were threats made from the challenger's camp to school board members, and the censorship issue polarized our community. The teacher who began the Modern Literature course decided not to teach it any more, and younger teachers felt paranoid about offering a new literature. In February 2005, the challengers appeared on the cover of a local magazine discussing the inappropriateness of The Perks of Being a Wallflower. But other than that, Arrowhead has not heard from this family.

The positive results of the book challenge far outweighed the negative results. Educated, well-respected members of the community surfaced to support our educators by speaking during the reconsideration hearings, attending school board and policy meetings, writing letters of support both to the newspaper and to the educators themselves. One man who spoke at a school board meeting said he had served in Iraq to maintain the same freedoms that the challengers were trying to take away. That made us all think.

We revised our selection policy and our reconsideration procedures, including the reconsideration form and had them all approved by the ACLU. We are diligent about our completing rationales for teaching before purchasing books and posting those rationales on the web page. We made the challengers aware that we would defend the next books they wanted to challenge (including Krik Krak, The Joy Luck Club, Curious Incident of a Dog in the Nighttime, Like Water for Chocolate), one-by-one, in the same manner by which we challenged the first. Out of the 200 students taking Modern Literature the following semester only two had parents who would not let them read The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Arrowhead has had informal challenges to our materials, but no one has filed a formal complaint since this challenge.

In accordance with our policies and procedures, an ad hoc committee was assembled, consisting of a community member (who happened to be an attorney), two students (one from each campus), the South Campus librarian, the North Campus building principal, and a teacher from each building. Everyone was given a copy of the book at the first meeting (Nov. 1), and the second committee meeting was set for Nov. 16.

Before the second committee meeting, there was a heated school board meeting (complete with reporters and 40-50 parents, community members, and students), several articles and letters to the editor were published, and the principal's voice mail was flooded with hundreds of calls from Christian radio listeners from all over the country backing the challengers.

During the same time, the English teacher, the English department chair, and I prepared the defense. It is best to prepare beforehand through clear policies and procedures. However, when a school is in the throes of a challenge, there are organizations you can contact for help.

Because I live in Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin--Madison, I am familiar with the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc). This is an invaluable resource for anyone facing a challenge or developing a rationale for teaching a book. CCBC librarian Megan Schlesman was able to fax over 50 pages of documentation, including periodical articles, distinctions and recommended lists, and related materials on The Perks of Being a Wallflower specifically and censorship generally. I also received the CCBC Intellectual Freedom packet and hard copies of all materials were sent through the mail. In addition to resources, the CCBC staff was able to reassure me that we were not porn peddlers, which is how the challengers would have you feel.

The next place I went was the American Library Association (ALA http://www.ala.org), which provides banned books lists and has many other resources. The people at ALA directed me to the Wisconsin Educational Media Association (WEMA www.wemaedline.org). How could I forget my state professional organization? Both ALA and WEMA provided me with a variety of resources regarding censorship. But their representatives reminded me that this was a curricular censorship issue, not a library censorship issue.

Because it was an English curriculum issue, I contacted the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE http://www.ncte.org/about/issues/slate). My contact, Millie Davis, faxed an eloquently written letter for the book review committee. This letter cited the publication The Students’ Right to Read, noting that censorship “leaves students with a distorted picture of the ideals, values and problems of their culture.” She also stressed that a book should be studied as a whole, and “the ethical and literary value of a work is distorted if one focuses only on particular words, passages, or sections.” The NCTE also believes that character's comments do not
necessarily reflect the view of the author (or the school).
Taken out of context, any piece of literature can be devalued.
And finally, Davis reminded us that nearly every instructional
material includes something that will be offensive to
someone. So, if we remove everything that is found
offensive to a particular individual or group, there will
be little left to teach.

The NCTE provided the
position and guidelines papers.
I n addition to the
aforementioned Students’ Right
to Read, there are Instructional
Methods and Selection of
Materials papers. These papers
are all included with the
SLATE (Support for the
Learning and Teaching of
English http://www.ncte.org/
about/issues/slate) Information.
Invaluable information on this
site was the book rationales. If
e a teacher in our school wants to
adopt a new text, he or she must
fill out a book rationale before
purchasing the book. After the
book’s purchase is approved,
the rationale is published on our
website.

My next contact was with the
Wisconsin Department of
Public Instructions English
representative (http://
dpi.wi.gov/curriculum/engl Langarts.html), Gerhard
Fischer. Another excellent
resource, Fischer discussed
issues directly with the
instructor of the class. He

Call for Papers

2007 Edition

Writing Instruction in the English Language Arts Classroom

This year’s WCTELA Conference focuses on writing instruction.
We thought it would be a good idea to link the fall issue of WEJ
to this topic. We invite you to submit articles that discuss any
aspect of composition in the language arts: successful
assignments you have designed, strategies for peer workshops or
other kinds of formative response to writing, formal and informal
assessment strategies.

This is a large and rich topic, but we also welcome articles on
other issues of interest to language arts teachers.

Forward submissions
and/or inquiries to:

Ruth Wood

See WEJ Submission
Guidelines on Page 2

Electronic submissions are welcomed.
Deadline: September 17, 2007

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