From the Editor

Ethics in the English Classroom

Published in the summer of 2011, this issue’s focus on ethics recalls for me the events of September 11, 2001. Although this September marks the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and comes on the heels of Osama bin Laden’s death, we have not planned an issue dedicated to this anniversary; however, the topic of “Ethics in the English Classroom” provides an appropriate place to consider how 9/11 has emphasized the importance of teaching and learning values in high school and middle school.

In the March 2005 English Journal, I wrote a column titled “The Post-9/11 English Teacher,” in which I reflected on the importance of our work as English teachers based on the findings of The 9/11 Commission Report, which had been recently published. In that column I identified several areas from the report that resonate with the English language arts curriculum and that I thought we should strengthen as we considered our own responses to 9/11 and its aftermath. As you read this list, you might think about how your local school curriculum and your own teaching have developed in these areas:

Imagination. The authors found that the success of the 9/11 attacks resulted partially from the fact that agents in the United States did not have the capacity or will to imagine them. As a result, the Commission recommended that imagination become a routine part of intelligence agencies’ ways of doing business. I suggested that the events of 9/11 could help argue for the importance of imagination in education, particularly in our increasingly standardized and data-driven curriculum. The theme of the March 2010 English Journal issue asked, “Are We Killing Imagination?”

Globalization. According the 9/11 Commission Report authors, members of al Qaeda thought of America as near to them, while Americans thought of them as very far away. This “cultural asymmetry” (340) echoed for English teachers the importance of using non-Western literary texts to help our students develop a better understanding of the world in which the United States is situated socially, politically, and economically.

Cooperation. The assumption that competition between agencies would strengthen US intelligence was wrong, according to the 9/11 Commissioners. Sharing resources, exchanging information, decreasing secrecy, and enhancing collaboration among agents with similar missions would have improved the United States’ ability to detect and prevent terrorist attacks. Certainly the enhanced use of competitive grants in education (especially at the federal level) and the increasing attention to district-by-district comparisons of standardized exams scores have done nothing to promote cooperation among educational leaders. But there are ways we can make change in our individual classrooms. How have you helped your students to develop the skills of cooperation and collaboration and the disposition to prefer cooperation to competition?

Disaffected Students. Terrorist organizations recruit alienated young people and help them develop the capacity for self-destruction and mass murder. How have you used your English class to help students feel more positively connected to the people and communities around them?

World Religions. Spiritual beliefs have important effects on people’s identities and their ways of understanding the world and the people around them. How has your English class helped students...
to better appreciate differences and similarities among peace-loving religions? For help, see in this issue Mark Letcher's reviews of several YA texts with religious themes in his highly recommended “Off the Shelves” column.

The Ethics of Science and Technology. Advances in technology and science do not come without an ethical price. How have you helped your students understand ethical considerations of “progress”? How have you collaborated with teachers in the sciences and social sciences to investigate the kinds of critical thinking students should develop? Leah A. Zuidema and Jonathan Bush’s “Professional Writing in the English Classroom” column in this issue offers a relevant perspective.

Coping with Fear. Many Americans were taken aback by their personal reaction to the death of bin Laden. Images of celebrating young people in cities across the United States reminded us of how frightening the terrorist had become for those who were young children ten years ago. Those same young people are now facing economic uncertainty of historic proportion and a world in which terrorism still exists. How have we helped students use writing, speaking, reading, and listening to develop the capacity to cope with legitimate but potentially damaging fear? How have we helped students to enjoy the pleasures that life holds, even in an uncertain world?

Promoting Empathy. A great deal of ill will could be avoided if more people exhibited empathy and a propensity for understanding the lives of others. Yes, it’s important that we engage our students in subject matter that speaks directly to their lives, but it is also important that we expose them to places, beliefs, feelings, and ideas that they would not otherwise encounter, so that they can better understand how people who are not much like them live. Our work in this area might help to decrease terrorism (and the mistaken belief that it is sometimes justifiable) and decrease incidences of bullying, which remain far too common in our schools.

Readers interested in other English teachers' reflections on our work in the post-9/11 era, please also see the November 2006 English Journal, “Looking Forward: Teaching English After 9/11,” which Louann Reid, then EJ editor, was kind enough to allow me to guest edit.

In this issue, readers will find articles that examine other ethical questions related to English language arts. Richard VanDeWeghe leads off with a reflection on ethics in the context of the Common Core Standards in his “EJ in Focus.” We also include articles on ethics as a tool for inquiry and the ethics of grading group work. Two articles examine issues of plagiarism, focusing on creating assignments that invite discussions with students about plagiarism and that use technology in ways that avoid plagiarism. Readers will also find two articles that encourage students to critically consider the costs of war, and a “Speaking My Mind” that reflects on the spirituality of grading.

In addition, this issue includes an article on using storyboards for promoting reading and a host of informative columns and other features. Finally, we are pleased to offer, in an “EJ Extra,” Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer’s most recent research findings regarding the teaching of writing in secondary and middle schools.

Summers for teachers are all about taking time away from the conveyor belt of classes to reflect on the results of our efforts. I hope readers will find this issue motivating and reenergizing.

We are also excited about the next issue of English Journal, guest edited by Leila Christenbury, that celebrates the 100th anniversary of the National Council of Teachers of English. The personal reflections and wealth of historical and current information about NCTE’s resources will fascinate new English teachers and those who have been members for decades. It will be an excellent way to begin a new year of school. Until then, have a great summer, and enjoy all those reading and writing plans that have been piling up since last summer!

Works Cited


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