From the Editor

Students Reading and Writing for Their Own Purposes

My friend and former colleague on NCTE’s Secondary Section Steering Committee, Jennifer Ochoa, recently published an essay with us titled “Three Things I Know for Sure.” In it, one of Jennifer’s certainties is about taking her students seriously. She says, “I must remember and respect the ‘teenager-ness’ of adolescents” (15). She recalls a lesson in which she imposed what she assumed would be a popular assignment on her students and found herself disappointed when the students were far from enthusiastic about it. Showing the instincts of a good, experienced teacher, Jennifer realized that she had not appropriately taken into account what the students really wanted from the time they were all spending in her English class, and she did a better job of appreciating what it is they were looking for. Her new lesson, which I encourage readers to go back to her essay and read about, was far more successful. In her essay, Jennifer also shares further explanation of what she means by the “teenager-ness” of her students:

Sometimes I forget students’ teenage agendas are essential too. I need to be an expert on the books they like to read. I need to insist on and count writing that is important to them, in addition to school writing. (16)

Given the emphasis we teachers are obligated to give new curriculum standards and new exams, based more and more frequently on the agendas of people who haven’t been in a school classroom in many years, it’s easy to forget that our students have their own purposes for developing literacy skills. I want to thank Jennifer for reminding us that students’ agendas matter too, and that we would do well to remember to take them into account as often as possible—especially in the present cultural climate, in which students’ desires are too easily lost in the cacophony that has become educational reform. Jennifer’s point also serves as a perfect way to introduce the focus of this issue: “Students’ Reading and Writing for their Own Purposes.”

Incorporating Students’ Purposes

One of the unique aspects of English language arts is that its focus on developing literacy skills allows teachers to integrate students’ personal interests and goals directly into the curriculum. In fact, NCTE’s Learning Standard 12 is about just that: “Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).” As important as helping students to develop an inclination and ability to use their literacy skills for their own purposes is, some would argue it’s among the least emphasized of the twelve NCTE Standards. This standard is not easily assessed, nor do prepackaged curricula generally accommodate students’ individual goals and interests. To raise awareness of and share strategies for fulfilling this important standard, we called for articles for this issue of English Journal that focus on ways in which teachers can incorporate students’ purposes in English classes. Our authors did not disappoint.

In these pages, readers will find articles on examining popular culture and using technology in...
English class, having students create class anthologies of creative writing, asking students to examine the writing that will be required in their future careers and in college, and engaging students in provocative discussions inspired by classic literature, among others. We’re also pleased that James Blasingame Jr., Alleen Pace Nilsen, and Don Nilsen have once again offered their view of the best young adult literature of the past year in their annual Honor List. As well, we have published other articles, columns, and poems to enlighten and inspire.

Is School an “Abstract Labyrinth”?

We were intrigued by this issue’s cover art because its graffiti style connotes a personal, out-of-school, even unauthorized aesthetic, something that fits well with a theme focused on students’ personal agendas for literacy. But the artwork’s name also raises for us a troublesome issue in contemporary education. Because students are being asked more and more frequently to put their individual interests on hold for the purposes of assessment and to achieve standards that, at least in most cases, have been imposed on them without their consultation, we should ask: Is school like an abstract labyrinth, a series of blind alleys and sharp turns that all students must take simultaneously and in a standardized fashion at the behest of others? Isn’t education more beneficial and more effective for students when their own interests and ambitions are solicited and incorporated into the ways in which they are taught?

This is not news for good English teachers, but in the present climate, NCTE’s Standard 12 could use a little extra support. We hope this issue will remind you to honor your students’ agendas and make them an important part of your English class.

Work Cited


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