From the Editor

The Community in the Classroom

At its best, English language arts is a vibrant, dynamic field centered on communication among people. Written and spoken language, image, and sound all exist so that people may understand each other. So full of life is language that centuries of writers speak to us even from beyond the grave, as current technologies expand the possibilities for worldwide communication and collaboration to a dizzying degree. How exciting to be able to tap into the energy of the world of communication to enliven our classes and energize our students.

One important step in tapping into that energy is to acknowledge that we teach in communities. Our students are members of many communities (blocks, neighborhoods, clubs, churches, families, after-school workplaces, and more) and many communities depend on our students as members; that dependence will only grow as the students mature. Engaging our students as members of communities and enlisting other members of those communities in our students’ education are ways of tapping into the larger world of energy that informs English language arts. This issue of *English Journal*, themed “The Community in the Classroom,” includes articles that tap the energy of community in several ways.

Bringing the Community into the Classroom

As we are preparing students for lives outside the classroom, it makes sense for us to bring aspects of the community into the classroom so the students can learn about what will be expected from them later. In his “EJ in Focus” in this issue, Jim Burke describes how he helped his students develop writing, interviewing, and other skills of literacy related to finding a good job. Jim could have done all the teaching on his own, but instead he tapped members of the local business community to serve as practice interviewers and mentors for his students. Bringing those community members to his classroom, Jim better engaged his students’ interests and ensured that his students would receive cutting-edge, real-world knowledge from the field. The students also had real audiences for their work, providing a more authentic context for their writing and more authentic assessment. In addition, Jim helped a group of local professionals see the good work that goes on in their local high school. Lessons like these are a windfall for student learning and community relations.

Cathy Fleischer and Kimberly Coupe Pavlock also bring local community members into their classrooms by hosting workshops on effective writing instruction for parents of schoolchildren. Best practices in the teaching of writing are not exactly what many members of the general public believe they are, and speaking one-on-one with interested parents can improve their ability to help their children develop important literacy skills. Parents may also become strong advocates of truly effective writing instruction, and we could certainly use more allies there. Read Fleischer and Pavlock’s “Inviting Parents In: Expanding Our Community Base to Support Writing” in this issue for great ideas and useful resources.

Sending Students into the Community

We all want students to become lifelong readers and to develop an appreciation of literary classics. We should also help students to better understand
the other texts in their lives. Texts, broadly defined, would include the organizations in their neighborhoods, the political and business communities, and the people and places that make their hometown what it is. English classes can provide many opportunities for students to use their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to explore and get involved in their local communities.

In this issue, Lauren Esposito describes a project in which she asks students to create a public service announcement on some local community issue of personal importance to them. In another article, Amy Dayton-Wood and her colleagues discuss how they sent students out to interview historically important members of their local community. The students researched before interviews, arranged the interviews, transcribed their conversations, and triangulated their data with other information to make genuine contributions to a rich oral history. Fahima Ife’s “Powerful Writing: Promoting a Political Writing Community of Students” also engages students in community issues, helping them to develop critical thinking and to take empowered stances on issues that matter to them.

Treating the Classroom as a Community

It’s also true that every classroom is itself a community, and the majority of the articles in this issue have taken up this aspect of the theme. Several articles look at ways to create more community among students by engaging them in collaborative writing: Deborah Dean and Adrienne Warren discuss how informal writing can develop personal connections among students; Elizabeth Edmondson describes how wikis bring a new level of collaborative intensity to literature circles; and Karin H. deGravelles, Jacqueline Bach, and their five co-authors share an amazingly cooperative assignment in which four English classes wrote creative “novel-zines” together.

Megan Lynn Isaac’s article, “‘I Hate Group Work!’ Social loafers, Indignant Peers, and the Drama of the Classroom,” takes on some of the problems of treating a classroom as a community. “Digitalk as Community,” by Kristen Hawley Turner, will introduce you to a new way to think about the texting language that might be driving you crazy as it blends into students’ formal writing. Students aren’t just using shorthand; they are creating written personas that interact fully as members of complex electronic communities that are accessed from increasingly convenient screens. If we can help students view themselves as writers in those communities, it may help them to better understand the skills required for writing in more formal contexts as well.

Connecting Classroom and Community

Our schools are surrounded by dynamic, living, breathing communities that thrive on sharing experience and information. That sharing—communication among people—is at the heart of English language arts. That sharing is also part of what makes our students who they are and can help them understand what developing strong literacy skills can do for them and those they care about. In all ways possible, for the benefit of our students, their communities, and for the benefit of our schools (which ultimately serve larger communities), we should find ways to connect those communities to our classrooms.

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