From the Editor

Steady Hands on the Rudder

I’m writing this editorial on December 31, 2012, and this day—especially as I introduce the second to last English Journal of my term as editor—encourages big-picture reflection. As I write, the media reports that a deal on the so-called fiscal cliff, the collection of dramatic tax hikes and spending cuts set to take effect tomorrow—is not looking likely. Some predict this lack of action will result in another national recession and will certainly slow any economic progress recently made. But no politician wants to vote in favor of a deal that will raise taxes or cut spending on popular programs. The politicians may remain passive, if the media’s predictions hold, preferring to let the economy fall “off the cliff,” so they may act later to “lower” taxes and “increase” spending. It’s a clever move for the politicians’ interests, if a reckless one for the rest of us.

At the same time, the United States is still reeling from the horrible, senseless shooting of 20 very young students and 6 educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Many have spoken eloquently about the courage of the teachers at Sandy Hook, whose actions in the face of unspeakable fear saved countless children. These educators acted against their own interests, putting the well-being of the children in their charge ahead of their own safety, and the six who gave their lives have been appropriately celebrated as heroes. They’ve also inspired me to think again about who teachers are as a profession.

This year has seen remarkable change in how teachers are evaluated, in what they are expected to teach, and—most importantly—who gets to make these determinations. One might think that in the face of this change, there would be widespread anxiety, anger, and depression among educators. But this is not how they, in my experience, have responded. Every educator I have spoken to has found something positive about the Common Core State Standards to focus on, even though they exhibit some problems, particularly the fact that they were developed without adequate input from teachers. New exams at virtually every level, designed to...
control the classroom and who may teach in it, will soon be rolled out. New teacher evaluation systems, required by Race to the Top, tie student test scores directly to teacher effectiveness, despite the myriad problems with the accuracy of such a direct measure. And yet, every administrator and teacher I have spoken with has shown a confidence that even though education’s next few years are likely to be stormy, problems will be identified and appropriately worked out. Even the breakneck pace of the changes imposed by education reformers (many of whom seem more interested in profit and political ambition than teaching and learning) has not rattled the teachers I’ve spoken with locally, at regional and national conferences, and with whom I’ve communicated regarding *English Journal*.

Teachers’ professional associations have been attacked, their expertise has been questioned, their professional development needs have been belittled, and their ethics have been challenged. And yet, teachers have kept themselves focused on the important work they’ve chosen to take on as a profession: helping all students learn. A few years ago, we produced an *EJ* with a sailboat on the cover, and the theme was “For the Fun of It!” (July 2009). Teaching English, like sailing, is indeed fun. But sometimes the journey is threatened by high, humid winds and blustering seas. In those moments, a vessel can be victimized by the currents, pulled in too many directions at once, sustain too much pressure, losing its integrity and its way. But a steady hand on the rudder keeps a vessel on course and the sailors moving resolutely forward.

This issue of *English Journal* will reach readers as one of the rockiest years in education comes to an end. It is a shorter issue than most—because many of the issues this year were longer than average—but it contains many treasures. We include excellent articles on strategies for teaching reading (for example, questioning the wisdom of the practices ascribed to “good readers” and advocating for the addition of hip-hop in literary studies), innovations in the teaching of writing (including the development of high school writing centers and studying the value of dual-credit writing courses), reminders of the importance of young adult literature (such as reconsiderations of comic strips and YA authors’ memories of influential teachers), and even an “EJ Extra” that may encourage English teachers to start conversations about language with their math colleagues. And much more.

We remain committed to exploring the best knowledge and innovation for truly helping students learn the knowledge and skills of English language arts that they need to be successful. We hope these articles and columns will help you keep a steady hand on your classroom’s rudder as you negotiate the rocky shores along your course.

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