
A Letter From the Editors— On Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks...

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It's 2pm this sad Sunday. Sundays are always sad when I'm up here contemplating still another leave-taking in an hour to frolic among the careening F-150s hauling troop transports on unchained trailers down I-35 to Minneapolis. My 77 year-old mentor Howard Bowers—wood crafter extraordinaire and rose guru—mocked me for years about having to go, and about how he got to stay in “Paradise” because he lived and worked here. Now even Howard has left, dying peacefully in his sleep last week after a devastating year of bone cancer that left him staring longingly out his window every day toward the shop only a gentle five iron away from where he could no longer ply his craft.

I've been roofing today. There are worse things, but not many. I'm 66 now—too old for bending my back for hours against a 25 mile-an-hour breeze snapping at exposed skin my old Purolator windbreaker can't protect. But I'm done now. And my reward, as I sit on the deck and gaze out on the Lake Lady, is a sky so cracklingly clear and brilliant that I can see without straining the white taconite mill on the North Shore thirty-five miles away against the hills behind it.

Yes, I'll be bugging out for home today, but the end of

that is drawing nigh. A one-semester sabbatical looms on the horizon. And, after that, one more full-time “victory lap” before I begin three years of phased (or, perhaps, it should be “unfazed”) one semester-per-year retirement. Good work if you can get it—particularly in these anxious economic times when the obscene “retrenchment” word is being uttered in more than a whisper. “The Cliff”, I'm being told at my bi-weekly dean's chairs meetings, is coming. Not next year, though that one will be bad. 2011—that's the *big* one. I'm told that, after it's over, our institution won't look the same. But, I'm told, “The Second Cliff” will follow it—perhaps in 2014-15, like a tsunami after an earthquake at sea. And there will be real casualties from that one.

I'm an old dog. Perhaps I should scrape my chips from the table and walk—now. But I can't. I've been teaching since 1971, and I—like all of you—love what I do. I can't believe my good fortune to be selling texts I love to students, so many of whom have been grateful for having invested in them. I haven't started to put my pants on backwards yet. And, though I've killed my share of brain cells over the years, entering a classroom still lights me up. Howard used to tell me, as recently as three weeks ago, to never retire. “Stay busy, Bill,” he said. “Every day I live to learn something new. Once you stop learning your craft, you're dead, even if you're still vertical.”

This has been a hell of a year for me in that very way—not just staying vertical, but learning. I've been assembling, with the rest of our five-person faculty development team, writing-across-the-curriculum workshops for twenty-two years now. This year, we're recreating ourselves. Though our focus has always been on student writing, we've begun to explore whether there's a provable connection between the quality of our students' writing (in Gen. Ed. courses, in discipline-driven classes; in graduate-level classes) and faculty writing. What if we shared our writing with our students? Would it engage them? Would they be interested in our struggles to compose, develop, edit, and meet deadlines for our professional writing? You *bet* they would, at least from my experience. Would their own writing process be

enriched at all by knowing our composing process? *Absolutely.*

In addition to building some inductive sessions for our faculty participants on that subject, we're adding a component—an entire day—on online pedagogy. Now, here's the problem: I will have developed nine separate courses for online delivery by next spring. However, I have never, in the four years I've been teaching courses online, had a meaningful discussion about HOW to deliver them—best practices; constructivism; active learning. And I've NEVER had a meaningful discussion on the specific “best practice” elements of “face-to-face” teaching that might transfer well—might, even be indispensable—to an online course. I'm even more excited that some T.A.s who know technology so much better than an old dog like me are going to participate in this workshop, one of whom is writing a portfolio for her M.A. in English Studies on this very subject. I can't wait.

New tricks for old dogs. That's what those of us who, like the Ancient Mariner, may have stayed at the party a little longer than most require to re-invent themselves. And, so, I've re-envisioned my teaching of *Macbeth* by marrying consumerist theory with hypertext theory, with a huge assist from the most significant mentor in my intellectual life. I'm building a new web site for my tiny little Humanities Program in order to draw positive attention to it, to fend off the possibilities of it falling off the 2011 “Cliff” into Oblivion, a place just south of Northern Iowa. And, just to make things interesting, I've built a graduate certificate program called “Teaching Humanities” which I'll begin to teach out-of-hide next fall online. Bring it on.

And that's why this old dog will be learning Italian—as much as an old and memory-challenged dog can absorb—during my sabbatical: a couple of months of study with—delight of all possible delights!—my daughter, who has a facility with languages, will do circles around me, but all with great laughter and camaraderie; and then a month at a language school in Cortona, where I can make a fool of myself, drink cheap wine, eat great food, and live with the nuns in the little St. Margherita Convent on top of the little mountain on which Cortona is situated. Old dogs. New tricks.

All of which brings me to this, my final issue of *MEJ*. I've enjoyed my tasks as editor immensely. It has been my distinct pleasure to assist in the birth of six solid issues of our organization's professional magazine. I've enjoyed writing for it. You'll be the final arbiter of whether we've developed a good product in *MEJ*. But I'm fairly pleased with where it is now. It's online, where it's most accessible to those of us who read and use it. And this issue finally fulfills the potential I've hoped for from it by representing not only full-length articles of some diversity but also a submission to the “letter to the editors” page and a pretty substantial representation in the “teaching tips” section.

There's more to be done, but not by me. An infusion of new ideas is in the offing. Perhaps a new editor can decipher the clues essential for stimulating a higher volume of submissions—*MEJ* badly needs that. I've said it before—we're all busy, but our credibility with our students as writing instructors hinges upon the regularity of our own professional writing. Ask Jen Budenski-Behnke about that. She's our winner of this year's “Best *MEJ* Article” award. Who knows where she gets the time to write as frequently as she does—better yet, ask her husband! All I know is that she does it because she must; her piece on a multi-modal (semiotics!) approach to reading and writing is cutting-edge, and she does it beautifully. Perhaps, too, with more submissions, *MEJ* could (and should) be a peer-reviewed journal, achieving in the process so much more credibility and cachet as a preferred destination for professionals in our region to submit their work and for area professionals in English Studies and the Language Arts to read it.

What excites me most about this issue is that it's all about new teaching “tricks” and strategies. Everything in here is pedagogically-driven, written with a determination by the composers of these pieces to take risks with new teaching strategies, to write about what they've risked, and then to share it with us. I've already forwarded Kathryn Campbell's piece (“Moving from the Sage on the Stage to the Guide on the Side”) on the intentional teaching of discussion strategies to her students (brilliant!) to many of my colleagues and T.A.s in my

classes. And the beauty of this short piece is that it is a *teaching tip*—that’s how I’ve represented it within the pages of this issue!

It’s time to pack the Subaru now—lock the second-story sliding door of the carriage house and peer once more through the remaining aspen leaves toward the Big Lake (you’ll see very much of what I see from this vantage point on the back deck of the carriage house from Joel Cooper’s piece “Matins” which graces the cover of our fall issue).

Many thanks for the opportunity to work with so many of you so very closely on your writing. My heart is full. Read. Enjoy.

New tricks. From an old dog to valued colleagues.

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