



MCTE News

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Newsletter of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English

President's Column - by Sherri Larson

If You Remember Just One Thing Today...

I was given a surprisingly large handout at our departmental meeting: Minnesota Academic Standards, English Language Arts K-12. I leafed past charts, columns, gray-scaled headings, bullets, asterisks, and number.decimal.number.decimal.number.decimal.numbers, immediately overwhelmed. I knew that many caring and knowledgeable professionals worked diligently to name and strategize ways to make our students "college and career ready." But this 90-page, verb-heavy packet scared me. How could I possibly address all of this material? It is margin-to-margin full of important things to remember.

"If you remember just one thing today..." These exact words often conclude discourses in which there are actually *lot* of things to remember. When I hear or read these words, I am curious; if there really is just *one* important thing, why did the speaker/ writer present so many *other* things? On every page, the academic standards packet communicated how *everything* was important. Consider the verbs: read and comprehend, determine, analyze, interpret, assess, describe, delineate, and evaluate. Establish and maintain. Apply. Integrate. Wow! Who can argue? Plus, there are a *lot* of commas and conjunctions (and parentheses) (e.g. including examples). Not to mention some seriously potent bullet points.

There is more than one thing to remember.

I have had many conversations and meetings about the standards in the last year. I admit I still feel anxious. Insight and encouragement arrived for me recently from what I might have considered an unlikely rescue team: poetry and the Minnesota Department of Education.

Several years ago, I took a class from Minnesota poet and teacher Joyce Sutphen about classic poetry forms. Having used much of what I learned in the class with my students, I was pleased to share a few short and simple forms at a recent Minnesota Writing Project gathering. After the presentation, Charon Tierney, the English Language Arts Specialist at the Minnesota Department of Education and fellow board member at MCTE, thanked me. It is Charon's job every day to help educators understand the standards and successfully implement them; she has a wealth of knowledge and insight about how to do so. In just a few sentences, she gave me a perspective on my profession that I know will guide me this school year. "Thank you," she said. "Thinking about poetry reminds me why we do what we do. We love language."

(continued on page 2)

Looking for a Treat
on Halloween?
Come to MCTE's
Fall Workshop
featuring Deborah
Appleman!



When: October 31, 2011
Where: Crowne Plaza,
Plymouth (formerly the Radisson)
Cost: \$140, includes lunch
and a copy of *Adolescent Lit-
eracy and the Teaching of Read-
ing*. **To register, go to
mcte.org to sign up and
pay online!** If you choose
to pay by check, send it with
a copy of your confirmation
email to 7515 Izaak Walton
Rd, Bloomington, MN 55438

President's Column continued...

That's the one thing to remember, isn't it? *We love language*. Whatever paths we've taken to whatever positions we hold within this council of English teachers, it's still about loving language. The columned, numbered formality of the standards handout might at first appear to not connect with this more emotional draw toward the profession, but it gives the same message. At least 30 times, the goal of particular standards is to help students read and write "for personal enjoyment, interest, and academic tasks." I think that's the standards' way of saying, "Help the students love language!" That inspires me, and it's a goal I know language arts educators are committed to achieving. Whether identifying key details or analyzing multiple interpretations, it is our core responsibility and privilege to guide students to an understanding of language that leads to this love and appreciation. It's one thing to remember, and it's something I can believe in.

Opportunity Reminders...

**CALL FOR ARTICLES:
2012 MINNESOTA ENGLISH JOURNAL**
~ by Brian Lewis, Editor

Please consider submitting an academic article, a brief teaching tip, a letter to the editor, a hypertext, a multimedia presentation, or a creative work (such as a poem, short fiction, or play) for the next issue of *Minnesota English Journal*. We have no required number of pages or words for our submissions, but if you cite academic sources in your work, please do so according to *MLA Handbook for Writers for Research Papers*, 7th edition. Please also keep in mind that we are a peer-reviewed journal with an editorial board. Our acceptance rate is approximately 50-60%; therefore, we cannot accept all submissions. Most importantly, before you submit to *MEJ*, keep in mind that *MEJ*'s audience primarily consists of teachers from the elementary to the college level who want to learn more about effective teaching techniques.

**DUE DATE FOR SUBMISSIONS FOR 2012
ISSUE: SEPTEMBER 1, 2011.**

(The 2012 issue should come out by mid-February 2012.) Authors should be informed of the status of their submissions by October 15, 2011. If you have questions, comments, or concerns about the next issue of *MEJ*, please contact the current *MEJ* Editor, Brian Lewis, at brian.lewis@century.edu.

Looking for Talented 11th Grade Writers Across Minnesota

If you teach 11th grade English (or know someone who does!), please consider coordinating the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Contest in your school.

What do you have to do?

1. Identify your school's most talented 11th grade writer(s).
2. Get signatures on a form and submit it to NCTE by Feb 15
3. Help your nominee(s) select (up to ten pages of) their best work.
4. Administer an impromptu essay writing session (usually after school one day).
5. Mail your nominee(s) essay packets to the Minnesota coordinator in April.
6. Wait until October of the next year to find out the results of the contest.

Why should you bother?

1. Running the contest at your school sends the right message: We encourage writers!
2. Your talented writers deserve recognition. Being nominated at the school level is an honor. (This is not an anyone-can-enter contest).
3. Your talented writers compete to win state and national recognition. They compete against the best writers in rural, suburban, urban, public, private and charter schools across the state.

Click on "Writing Achievement Award" on the MCTE Homepage, which will redirect you to the NCTE information page to get started. If you have interest or questions, please contact me, Minnesota State Coordinator Heather Megarry Traeger at hmeg14@mac.com. I'll be happy to walk you through the process.

Looking for College Writing Professors and High School Teachers Who Teach Advanced Writing Classes

The judges for Minnesota's Achievement Award in Writing Contest are college professors and high school teachers from around the state. We have a great group that has been judging for us, but we always welcome new readers! If you are interested in judging, contact Minnesota State Coordinator Heather Megarry Traeger at hmeg14@mac.com. (The number of judges we need varies according to the number of entries, and some judges don't participate every year, so don't hesitate to send me an email, even if you're not sure about your time commitments. I will confirm the final judging list in May once I have all of the contest entries.)

Book Review~ by Laurie Lykken, Century College

Now You See It: A Review

If you know that education needs to be revamped and have ideas that you want to try but have not, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (Viking, 18 August 2011) by Cathy N. Davidson, professor of English and of Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University, is a book that could empower you to act. If you think education is in trouble and blame the students, *Now You See It* could change your mind. If you think education has problems but are not sure why, *Now You See It* could help to clarify your thinking. Although little here is new, Davidson's presentation is compelling. Her upbeat tone and use of anecdotal evidence from her own and from others' classroom experiences make her book both encouraging and exciting. In keeping with her idea that rigid hierarchies are a product of industrialization best left in the past, Davidson eschews using "Dr." to preface her name despite her PhD in English. Similarly, her unpretentious book is the antithesis of an academic tome; *Now You See It* is highly readable and accessible. "What has happened to us?" Davidson demands. "Rather than thinking of ways we can be preparing our students for their future, we seem determined to prepare them for our past." She goes on to tell us how we got where we are now, why this place is not working, and where some pioneers have already gone and are waiting for us to join them.

The book's title—*Now You See It*—comes from a lecture Davidson attended on the science of attention given by a philosopher who conducts research in the medical school at Duke. During the lecture, the audience was asked to watch a video of people dressed in either black or white tossing a ball around the group. They were asked to count the number of times the ball was passed between those wearing white only. At the end of the lecture, the philosopher asked who in the audience had seen the gorilla. Only one person had, author Davidson. As it turns out, she is dyslexic and could not attend to the task of counting tosses without becoming distracted. She alone noticed a woman wearing a gorilla suit enter the scene, walk up to the camera, wave, and walk away. The others in the audience suffered from "attention blindness"—attending so intently on the task and therefore missing the obvious.

Again and again, throughout the book, Davidson refers to the gorilla to reinforce the idea that distraction is essential to learning and not the villain many of us believe it is. She tells us that "learning, unlearning, and relearning require cultivated distraction, because as long as we focus on the object we know, we will miss the new one we need to see." She asks us to think about the "form of education...required in a world of social networking, crowdsourcing, customizing, and user-generated content." Collaborative work, like that needed to play complex computer games such as *Worlds of Warcraft*, is the key to better connecting what happens in school to the needs of the 21st Century workplace. Among the interesting examples that Davidson gives of education moving in the right direction are Duke's "Give all stu-

dents an iPod" experiment, Q2L (an experimental grade school based on games and gaming), her own college course titled "This Is Your Brain on the Internet," and a course called "Creative Productions" at a publicly funded charter school that was inspired, in part, by the book *Ender's Game*. Along with these examples, Davidson challenges the way we are measuring success—the standardized testing of "No Child Left Behind"—and the way we are handling student resistance to the rigid control required to keep—or try to keep—disparate and often disinterested students in lock-step. As Davidson says in an interview for *Inside Higher Ed* (24 June 2011): "If a quarter of students coming into our finest universities this year have been tested for, diagnosed with, or even medicated for a 'learning disability,' then it is long overdue that we thought about what we mean by that term."

If education shifts in the way Davidson suggests, will students be prepared for work in the 21st Century? Davidson answers yes provided that we develop educational games that are as engaging as *World of Warcraft* and the training game developed by the Army. She insists that by game-playing students will be better prepared "because [games] reinforce the idea that the more we know, the better the game is" because, after all, the "prize is an ability...to know they can count on their knowledge, their skills, their intelligence, and their peers to help them meet the challenges—whatever those might be—that lie ahead." For some insight into what that future might be, Davidson gives us several examples of what is already happening in the section she calls "Work in the Future." Here, for example, she challenges the idea that employees need to be physically present at an office when the tools needed to do office work are at home as well. One interesting example she gives as an alternative to everyone being in the same place is IBM, which employs people worldwide. One place these employees "meet" without the need for physical travel is in *Second Life* where IBM owns "islands" that serve as virtual meeting places that are fun. Even IBM recognizes the need for fun.

Some might fault *Now You See It* for being too anecdotal, too dependent on examples, or for not including more statistics to make it more "scientific." Some might find the upbeat tone too preachy and perhaps a little smug. Some might even find this book too radical for any sort of practical application. In other words, the book's strengths for some will be seen as its weaknesses by others. For those skeptics among us, I suggest starting with Chapter 8: "You, Too, Can Program Your VCR (and Probably Should)." However, whether you start at the beginning or with Chapter 8, *Now You See It* provides a narrative to get the much needed conversation about educational reform going...and in a positive way that is so often missing from all conversations about reform lately.

MCTE News is published four times a year as a benefit to members and is part of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. By November 1, 2011, please submit articles for the next issue to:

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MCTE News
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Inside this Issue:

Please note the front page reminder about the Fall Workshop! Registration MUST BE DONE ONLINE at www.mcte.org! If paying with a check, please print the confirmation email sent to you after registering online. Your check and copy of email can be mailed or presented at the workshop. Thanks!

Count ‘em Up: 750 Words Each Day
~by Kristin Gifford, new member from Anoka
Middle School for the Arts

What has been inspiring me to write this summer?

To get out of bed on lazy, warm mornings, sometimes as early as six, just to start each day with writing? Fame? Fortune? No, a little website called 750 Words.

750words.com is a free, digital space to dump ideas, experiment with writing, or simply journal. The idea for the site is based on an exercise called “morning pages” where writers begin each day by writing three pages, long-hand, in order to get ideas moving and clear a space in the brain for creativity. By writing three pages, or about 750 words, a writer can more easily access deeper ideas lurking beneath the surface of first thoughts. The website is a place to put those first thoughts. As the website creator says, “750 Words is the online, future-ified, fun-ified translation” of a writer’s notebook.

As you type your daily entries, the website simply records how many words you have written. When you get to the magic 750, a “congratulations” banner appears, and you can keep typing or view your data for the day--like how often you used the word “um” or how many times you were distracted while writing or which of the five senses you rely on the most in your writing. This fun information is presented without judgment in a variety of colorful graphs after each post.

Now, at first I was concerned that complete strangers might be reading my morning spill sessions. However, all entries are completely private unless a writer invites others to view his or her work. The only “public” aspect to your writing is a bulletin board on the homepage where the screen names of people who have written that day are posted, a constant celebration of the other participating writers.

Designed to chronicle your entries by day, the website keeps track of the number of days you write each month. You can easily go back to view or edit previous entries. Also, you can participate in various writing challenges, like writing 750 words every day for a month, in order to win various levels of badges that are pictured next to your name on the bulletin board. (Currently, I am a pretty proud Turkey badge recipient).

If you need a little accountability, a little motivation, or just a little fun when it comes to your daily writing, try joining 750words.com. Hope to see you celebrated online as an amazing writer!



Don't be a turkey and miss this opportunity to keep writing!

Gobble up some creative ideas today at 750words.com!