

A newsletter of the Montana Association of Teachers of English Language Arts
www.matelamt.com

MEA/MFT EDUCATORS' CONVENTION

Gorlewskis Share Strategies for Constructing Worlds with Words

by Donna L. Miller



During the MEA-MFT Educators' Conference, MATELA will host David and Julie Gorlewski as keynoters Oct. 19 at 1 p.m. in the Big Sky High School Auditorium.

The Gorlewski's presentation entitled *Undisciplined Writing: Constructing Worlds with Words* will address writing across the curriculum with a focus on the workshop model.

They will discuss how the everyday uses of writing refuse to conform to periods of time marked by schedules and bells. Because meaningful writing breaks disciplinary boundaries, intermingling content, form, and media will provide an opportunity for teachers to build bridges to learning not only about content but about our place in the world. The Gorlewski's keynote will also explore how writing workshops can create opportunities for teachers and learners to construct curriculum for a more just society.

Julie Gorlewski holds her Ph.D. in social foundations of education from the State University of New York at Buffalo. A former K-12 public school teacher, her research investigates the experiences of students, teachers, and educational leaders as they face the challenge of developing literacies and constructing identities in a society grounded in and saturated by the effects of settler colonialism.

She currently serves as department chair and associate professor of teaching and learning at Virginia Commonwealth University, and with David, she is co-editor of *English Journal*, the flagship publication of NCTE. Julie's recent publications explore the intersections of literacy, policy, and practice, revealing how dominant discourses influence identity development as well as public impressions of education and educators. In addition, her work considers how educators and community members can collaborate to interrupt systems of oppression and work towards equity and justice. She has published nine books, more than 20 peer-reviewed articles, and numerous book chapters and commentaries.

David Gorlewski earned his doctorate degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is an assistant professor in the School of Education at State University of New York at New Paltz where he currently serves as department chair and as a faculty member in the educational administration program, teaching courses leading to building and school district leader certification. He is also part of a collaborative team involved in the implementation and ongoing evaluation of a cohort model and a standards-based internship assessment system. David is a frequent conference presenter and a writer of four books and multiple peer-reviewed articles. His K-12 experience was on the administrative

side as an assistant superintendent.

MATELA collaborated with NCTE and Writing Projects Under the Big Sky to bring the renowned pair to Montana. See www.mea-mft.org/educators_conference.aspx for full list of sessions and to register. ♦

Author Events at MEA/MFT

Oct. 18: Jeanette Ingold, Young Adult and Historical Fiction Author

"Old Times, Young Voices: History for Today's Readers"

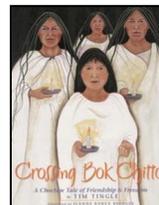
No-host dinner at 6 p.m.; Speaker at 7:30 p.m.

Jakers Bar and Grill, 3515 Brooks
OPI Renewal Units Available



Oct 20: Tim Tingle, Choctaw Author and Storyteller

MATELA's Keynote Speaker
10 a.m., Big Sky High School Auditorium

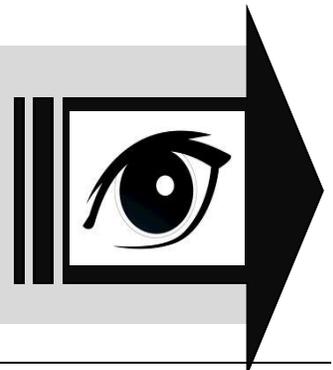


In a follow-up sectional, Tingle will share more about his books and their application in the classroom.



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Whitehall Teacher Caitlin Chiller Wins National Recognition

by Donna L. Miller



MATELA President and Whitehall teacher Caitlin Chiller may live and work in a small town, but she has earned a big-time award. She was named the national recipient of the 2017 High School Teacher of Excellence Award, sponsored by NCTE.

The award presentation will take place at the Secondary Section Luncheon Nov. 18 during the NCTE Annual Convention in St. Louis. Whitehall High School Principal, Hannah Nieskens is planning a local, public recognition of the award, as well.

Chiller has taught in the Simms and Whitehall school systems. Her colleagues consider her a passionate professional who "engages her students both in her class and outside, making connections through multiple school activities that allow her to tie literature and writing to their interests." They also refer to her as one who "encourages students to be self-aware and proactive in their educations and in their futures."

Professor of English at Providence University-GF, Curt Bobbitt said: "During the five years I have known Caitlin Chiller, we have collaborated on several projects. Her personal knowledge, talent,

and excellence continue to inspire me as I finish my 42nd year of teaching. Her continuing service to students and colleagues in Montana embodies the affiliate's mission to 'Support and promote the teaching and learning of English language arts K-16.'"

A testament to her commitment to the profession, Chiller has served as the Editor for *Signatures from Big Sky*, Montana's literary/art magazine that showcases writing and art from K-12 students.

She is a lesson designer for the Master Teacher Project BetterLesson, and an alumna of NEA's Teacher Leadership Initiative. She serves as MATELA's President, and for three years worked with organizers of the MEA/MFT Educators' Conference as MATELA's Conference Chair. In that capacity, she scheduled workshops for the program, managed the budget, and arranged keynote speakers. In addition, Chiller's résumé enumerates multiple achievements to which she can now add 2017 High School Teacher of Excellence. ♦

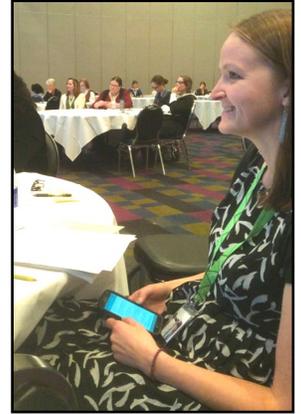


Photo by Curt Bobbitt

Chiller attends NCTE Convention, Nov. 2016

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Printing courtesy University
of Providence—Great Falls

MATELA Brings Home Two NCTE Awards for Excellence

By *Katie Kotynski*



Montana’s affiliate of NCTE, MATELA along with its newsletter, the *Update*, earned awards for excellence this summer, one of seven chapters to be so awarded.

ships with Math and Science (sic) offer great potential. She also mentioned that she was impressed with how MATELA keeps in touch and supports its members: “Your methods of communication—from your well-conceived website and phenomenal newsletters—all contribute to keeping members informed and aware,” she said.

“In terms of advocacy, I was impressed with your SEAM program and how strong your affiliate is in support of teachers and students around the state through your various efforts,” she wrote.

“You are an affiliate that I would definitely hold up as a role model to others to show how effective a smaller affiliate number-wise can be in outreach around a state as big and Montana.” ♦

Affiliates who scored 90 or above using the established criteria are all recognized as having a newsletter of excellence.



“Your publication scored a perfect 100 out of 100 possible points! Our judges noted that your publication should be shared with others as it is an excellent example of a successful affiliate newsletter. They appreciate the plethora of news included within your publication,” said Julie Rucker, Chair of the Newsletter Award Committee in an email to Katie Kotynski, *Update* editor.

Chair of the NCTE Standing Committee on Affiliates Jean Boreen, said MATELA won the affiliate award for its breadth of accomplishments: “I was very impressed with your affiliate’s work this year for a number of reasons. I was impressed with your convention with its exciting sessions for your members as well as the interdisciplinary opportunities you offer; the joint member-



Photo by Curt Bobbitt

2017-Editors-at-work: Sue Stolp, Jess Gallo, Donna Miller, Beverly Chin, Caitlin Chiller, Dana Haring, Sean McConaha

Boogie on Down to St. Louis for NCTE Annual Convention

Join your colleagues, watch MATELA members accept chapter awards, network with teachers and authors from around the nation at NCTE’s annual convention in St. Louis, Nov. 16-19.

The hotel headquarters is the Marriott and we hope you will attend the affiliate breakfast Nov. 19 to watch MATELA board members accept the NCTE Newsletter of Excellence Award and the NCTE extends its deepest thanks and appreciation to all who contributed to MATELA’s recognition.

The Montana delegation will also celebrate the leadership and service of Curt Bobbitt, who is our Regon7 representative on the Standing Committee on Affiliates.

Jocelyn Chadwick, NCTE President-Elect and Program Chair, has invited our own Beverly Chin, NCTE Past President to participate in several special panels. Jimmy Santiago Baca, Leland Melvin, Jaqueline Woodson, Garth Hinds, Sherman Alexie, Rick Riordan, Neal Shusterman, Daniel Jose Older, and Kevin Henkes are among the many featured speakers and authors. ♦

MATELA Membership Form

Please join/renew by filling out this form, making out a check, and mailing both to MATELA’s treasurer at the address on the bottom of this form.

Name _____

Street/Box _____

City _____ Zip Code _____

E-mail Address _____

School _____

Grade Level _____

Phone (w) _____ (h) _____

(c) _____

PLEASE CHECK ONE:

Student membership: \$10 _____

Retired membership: \$10 _____

Regular yearly membership: \$25 _____

Special 3-year membership: \$65 _____

Special combined membership (includes MCTM, MST A) \$51 _____

New member: _____ Renewal: _____

Mail your check and this form to:
 Dana Haring, MATELA Treasurer
 620 First Avenue West, Kalispell, MT 59901

Or sign up online at www.matelamt.com

THE ART OF STARVING' BY SAM MILLER

Using Identity Literature as Self-Acceptance Intervention

By Donna L. Miller

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ome critics might suggest that Sam J. Miller tries to do too much with his debut novel, *The Art of Starving* (Harper Teen, 2017); that he takes on too many of the big young adult issues—bullying, identity

definition, suicide, absent parents, sexual orientation, body image, and eating disorders—without any real focus. Still, the book works; the story has potential to transport readers to a place of understanding and awareness.

Cultural identity literature at its best, *The Art of Starving* transports readers to a place so familiar we wonder whether we haven't been there before, where we know the people and can relate to their challenges, where we share their hunger for fulfillment, their starvation for affection, attention, and validation, and their hunger for justice.

Although the book will likely resonate with all readers, it especially targets teens struggling with identity and self-acceptance issues—those who feel lost, lonely, and isolated, those with suicidal ideation who need to know they're not alone, that they need to reach out and ask for help.

The story's protagonist, 16-year-old Matt who has been identified by therapists as an at-risk youth with suicidal ideation, believes he is a source of shame and embarrassment, that he is an "enormous fat greasy disgusting creature" (12). Matt fixates on what makes him different—his flaming red hair, his sexual preference, his poverty, his absent father, and his alcoholic mother—mostly unaware that these differences, which make him miserable, might also make him a stronger, improved version of humanity.

Searching for control and wanting some share of the power in the pecking order at Hudson High in New York, Matt controls his eating habits by counting calories and establishing rules. Under the influence of food deprivation, Matt discovers powers of concentration and focus. Led by his hunger, his senses on high alert, Matt sees, hears, and smells things others cannot.

For example, he trains himself to disentangle the threads of detail present in smells, which carry a plethora of information in diverse pieces, and he believes he can tune out all distractions and focus on what his senses tell him, on what his hunger is helping him to smell, see, hear, and feel. Once he makes this discovery, Matt feels invincible and doesn't want to lose his Peter Parker powers. Like an aphrodisiac which makes him feel invincible, this power fuels the vicious cycle of Matt's eating disorder. Although Matt knows that starving himself is bad, it feels so good. When he's ultra-aware, Matt can confront "Hudson High's soc-



cer stars; the shrewd-eyed roosters at the top of [the high school] pecking order" (5): Ott, Bastien, and Tariq—revelers in athletic stardom, parties, and privilege. Self-harm gives Matt power to set right a world gone rotten and to bring the scales of justice back into balance. Only after many negative experiences and considerable time does Matt realize that when he focuses on what he *wants* to see and learn and smell and feel, he can miss reality.

Through his soccer trinity—Ott, Bastien, and Tariq—Miller defines three bullying styles: 1) "Big and dumb and broad-shouldered" (15), Ott embodies the physical style of abuse. 2) A slim-hipped, smiling psychopath, Bastien excels at emotional abuse; his brutality is all verbal, as he strings together snatches of hate speech. 3) Tariq plays the by-stander role, a watcher who witnesses—without intervention—what his friends say and do. "He is their audience. The one they perform for" (16), essentially validating them with laughter or silent approval.

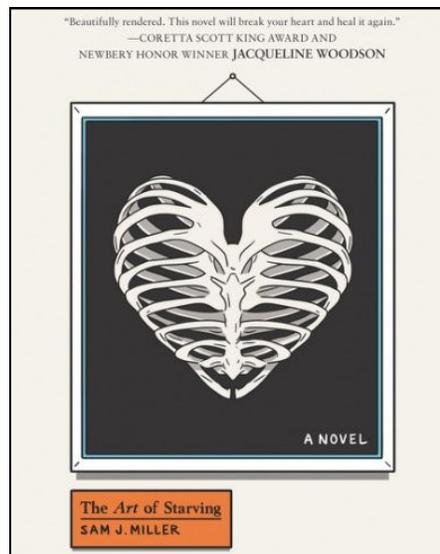
An intelligent, handsome, Syrian young man, Tariq Murat is also the target of Matt's lust interests, but Matt believes Tariq somehow lured his sister Maya into harm's way, so Matt lusts and hates Tariq in equal measure. With his sister missing, Matt has lost his lifeline, the person who has kept him tethered in the chaos of his life.

In her absence, Matt gives freer rein to his self-harm practices as he focuses on his Mission of Bloody Revenge, giving him a sense of purpose. As he asserts his power to solve the missing person mystery, to prove he's not weak, that he's stronger than his emotions, "strong enough to

bend and break his body into obedience" (260), strong enough to control his own destiny, Matt almost destroys himself with his own twisted, starving mind.

More than a boy with an eating disorder, more than a gay person, and more than a person who wonders whether "having no dad or having an asshole dad" (147) unhinges a person more, Matt emerges from his abyss damaged but strong enough to realize that when bad things happen, it doesn't help to rage, to place blame, or to wish for alternate outcomes. In his newly discovered strength, he not only realizes that he cannot bend the fabric of space and time and reality to get what he wants but also learns to accept that when bad things happen, he can choose whether to allow them to cause hurt.

From him, readers gain knowledge about deriving emotional fulfillment from more than physical desire or physical appearance or physical pleasure. We also learn the true connection between physical appearance and happiness; that in our desperation for guidance, "rulebooks are bullshit"; that our "bodies are clumsy machines full of strange parts that need expensive maintenance—and we do things to them that have consequences we can't antici-



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NEWS FROM OPI: Online Professional Learning Communities

Changing Seasons, Resources for English Teachers: Free Renewal Units Offered

Christy Mock-Stutz

As summer fades into fall, I watch the burning landscape as the fire season hits Montana full-force. Schools across the state are beginning the 2017-2018 school year and I am left wondering, how are we supporting teachers in these times of extreme and sometimes sudden change?



At the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) we strive to provide high-quality professional learning that is tailored to meet the needs of teachers in our cities and towns, as well as in our rural areas. By providing resources and strategic support for teachers as they craft their curriculum and instructional practices, we are giving them the stability to keep teaching at their best level even in the times of change. We have several ways to support English teachers in all areas of Montana.

Online Professional-Learning Communities – (PLC's)

Many teachers teach and live in rural and geographically isolated areas of Montana. They often do not have instructors in their buildings with whom to collaborate, so we developed a series of live, online meetings for teachers to log-in and join a discussion with other teaching professionals in their field. These PLC's run the same day each month. Recordings are then available on the Teacher Learning Hub, and renewal units are available. See the schedule below:

2nd Wednesday | 3:45 pm | Writing Teacher PLC

3rd Wednesday | 3:30 pm | Science Teacher PLC

STARVING From P. 4

Protagonist Realizes Emotions of Hate, Fear, Anger Lead to Destruction

pate" (333); that "life is a miserable shit-show for lots of very good people" (343); and that people only have the power over us that we give them, a lesson which reminded me of Eleanor Roosevelt's famous quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

Matt ultimately realizes that power deriving from anger, hate, fear, and shame leads to destruction; instead, "the greatest power comes from love, from knowing who you are and standing proudly in [that knowledge, claiming and accepting that identity]" (365). As Matt navigates life's difficult circumstances, he discovers that he is not alone, that he belongs.

Despite its heart-rending moments that plunge a reader to the depths of despair, Miller's debut novel also rides some waves of familiar experience with descriptions like the high school cafeteria, where amid "the stink of scorched taco 'meat' and spilled sour milk; hundreds of hormonal mammals heap abuse on each other and preen for potential mates" (23).

He also invites us to ask the important philosophical question: How do you fill your hole? We all occasionally experience feelings of emptiness, and how we choose to fill that hole has immense importance for emotional, physical, and mental health. We

4th Wednesday | 3:30 pm | Data and Assessment PLC
2nd Monday | 3:45 pm | Trending Teacher Topics PLC

To find the link to upcoming live PLC sessions, simply go the Teacher Learning Hub: opi.mt.gov/learninghub

The Teacher Learning Hub

This on-line professional learning site provides free renewal units for Montana teachers. Courses cover a wide range of content areas, and we have several writing courses available, with more opening soon.

Offered through a variety of course-types, teachers can personalize their learning through self-paced courses, facilitated courses, PLC's, or virtually-guided group courses. Check out the Teacher Learning Hub at opi.mt.gov/learninghub to learn more.

Professional Learning Portal

If you are looking for professional learning or providing professional learning, the portal is for you! This is a calendar of events from across the state. Searchable by topic, location, or type, this calendar is full of amazing opportunities for face-to-face and online learning opportunities for teachers. Don't forget to visit mtportal.org.

MontanaTeach.org

Montanateach.org is a resource-ready website. The best resources OPI has to offer from each of its divisions is on the site where you can easily and quickly search. Be sure to go to montanateach.org to find lesson plans, resources, and standards curriculum guides. ♦

can't look outside ourselves to find approval. From his sister Maya and her punk music, readers see the value in channeling addictive or obsessive traits into creating, rather than in destroying.

Young adult books like Miller's also hold potential to perform what psychologists call "attributional retraining," a process by which a person is led to reflect on his/her own attributions for a situation and to consider alternative explanations. For example, instead of thinking, "I'm not worth loving" or "Nobody loves me," attributional retraining replaces unhelpful explanations about self-worth with explanations that will sustain self-esteem.

Furthermore, reading about and discussing crisis situations helps people shift blame for negative events from "It's just me" to "I'm not alone; others share my struggles and find a way to survive." Such attributional retraining performs as acceptance intervention, which has the potential to downgrade uncontrollable stress by allowing people to put a narrative around their traumatic experiences. After reading and discussion, teachers might invite students to reflect upon their own crises and then write about those experiences with a beginning, a middle, and a hopeful end will frame their predicaments. This nonthreatening framework provides a template for interpreting daily challenges—they can be boxed, scrutinized, and managed. This process can help us heal. ♦

Belt Valley Shakespeare: Rural Montana Performs in Edinburgh's Central Hall

By Jeff Ross



Chosen as one of 39 high-school programs, the Belt Valley Shakespeare Players (BVSP) completed a four-performance run of *The Tempest* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest performing arts festival in the world. Belt students applied last year to be part of the American High School Theatre Festival (AHSTF) and were invited to perform at the festival, held in Scotland.

The AHSTF board of college drama professionals ranked the BVSP according to the following criteria: recent bodies of work, honors and awards, technical ability, community involvement, philosophies, recommendations and overall dramatic excellence.

So how does a non-audition, rural program with no school stage really get to Edinburgh? Well, it begins with a love of theatre and of working in ensemble. And it ends with actors determined to carve out an artistic presence performing Shakespeare regardless of the challenges. The trip itself was the culmination of a yearlong marathon of practices, local performances, and fundraising.

According to Jeff Ross, Belt drama director, this honor represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the young actors, and a point of pride for a rural Montana community. "The full impact of the trip on our students can hardly be measured now, but the value of immersing ourselves in great theatre both in London and Edinburgh and contributing to that artistic community with our own creative voice in performance cannot be overstated," Ross said.

Kevin Asselin, Executive Artistic director of *Montana Shakespeare in the Parks*, considers Fringe participation a life-changing event. Ross said his students gained other benefits from the trip. "Attending *Much Ado About Nothing* at Shakespeare's Globe and The Royal Shakespeare Company's performance of *The Tempest* reinforced the confidence of an already seasoned troupe.

"By seeing themselves, their characters on the stage through the guise of other actors, they experienced the potency of a shared performative identity. They implicitly understood character; they knew they belonged on a world stage," he said.

Ross shared more of his thoughts about the impact of this opportunity: "There were moments this summer and in Edinburgh, when I judged our

The full impact of the trip on our students can hardly be measured now.

Jeff Ross
Drama Director, Belt Valley Shake-

William Shakespeare's
The Tempest

Performed by the
Belt Valley
Shakespeare Players

Tickets 5£

Friday, August 4 @ 11:15 (12:45)
Saturday, August 5 @ 17:15 (18:45)
Sunday, August 6 @ 21:15 (22:45)
Monday, August 7 @ 21:15 (22:45)

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progress not by the sophistication or subtlety of our speeches, but by the quality of our silences."

In Act V when Ariel relates to Prospero the condition of his suffering friend Gonzalo confined along with Prospero's deserving enemies, Prospero is coaxed into forgiveness by a spirit who can only speculate on the relative value of human "virtue" vs. inhuman "vengeance."

Ariel: ...[Gonzalo's] tears run down his beard like winter's drops. From eaves of reeds. Your charm so strongly works 'em, That if you now beheld them, your affections would become tender.

Prospero: Dost thou think so spirit?
Ariel: Mine would, [madam], were I human.
Prospero : And mine shall.

See PLAYERS Page 7

PLAYERS from Page 6

Belt Students Tell Their Story at MEA Conference Oct. 20

Here we have the handoff of human virtue from Ariel to Prospero, a gift of spirit so incorporeal and yet so substantial that Prospero must receive it with the weight it deserves, with a silent pause. Though Shakespeare, through the shared line, directs an immediate response from Prospero, for us it is in the weight, the physicality of a silence where we see how far our young actors, Julia Vogt (Prospero) and Adrianna Irvine (Ariel), have come.

And we have come far. In fact all of us improved every night in Edinburgh, culminating with our very best performance of the year.”



Photo courtesy Jeff Ross

Hannah Palmer (Miranda), Adrianna Irvine (Ariel), Keaghan Opheim (Ferdinand)

If you would like to learn more about the *Players* adventure from the actors themselves, join us for “Belt Valley Shakespeare: From Rural Montana to Edinburgh’s Central Hall” at the MEA-MFT Educators Conference Oct. 20 10 a.m.-11:50 a.m. ♦



Photo courtesy Jeff Ross

Back row from left: Emily Highfill (Alonso, King of Naples), Daniel Westlake (Gonzalo), Julia Vogt (Prospero), Kali Duncan (Stephano), Keaghan Opheim (Ferdinand), Abby Marchington (Sebastian)

Front row from left: Hannah Palmer (Miranda), Adrianna Irvine (Ariel), Mo Wall (Caliban), Victoria Sherwood (Antonio), Charity Highfill (Trinculo)

All Invited to Annual Board Meeting to Elect New Officers, Network with Others

All MATELA members are invited to attend the annual business meeting, which will take place at noon Oct. 20, at MEA-AFT Conference.

Members will vote for the slate of officers and the meeting provides a chance to question members of the board and suggest projects for the organization.

The meeting also provides a way for members from around the state to get to know one another and network.

This year, members have the opportunity to enroll as a combined member of MATELA, MCTM (math) and NSTA (science) for the low price of \$51 per year. This membership option is especially for elementary teachers and those who teach more than one subject area.

The business meeting is an easy way to renew your membership. New members and renewals are also offered on our

website: www.matelamt.com Credit cards are accepted.

Slate of Executive Officers

Approval of the minutes of the meeting from October 2016

Vote for the slate of officers for the 2017-18 school year:

- Sue Stolp, President
- Caitlin Chiller, Immediate Past President
- Donna Bulatowicz, First Vice President; Conference Chair
- Second Vice President, Membership: Open
- Brynn Cadigan, Secretary
- Dana Hering, Treasurer
- Communications Chair: Open

CONFERENCE MUSINGS

Joint Affiliate Leadership Meeting Renews Vision of Advocacy for Educators, Student-Centered Instruction Focus

By Dana Haring

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ummer is a full of opportunities for rest, recreation, and, sometimes, renewal. I experienced a lot of the latter as I attended the Joint Affiliate Leadership Meeting in Atlanta July 7-9 along with two other MATELA members, Curt Bobbitt and Sean McConaha.



The sessions and presentations were rich with information and inspiration.

The meeting started Friday with an explication and discussion of NCTE's new vision statement (www.ncte.org/mission/vision). It says, in part, that "NCTE and its members will apply the power of language and literacy to actively pursue justice and equity for all students and the educators who serve them." It includes descriptors in "access, power, agency affiliation, and impact for all learners." This vision statement definitively puts students at the center of our organization, but with clear advocacy for educators as well.

This dual theme continued throughout the meeting's events. Sharon Draper, educator and author of many books including *Stella by Starlight*, *Copper Sun*, and *Out of My Mind*, provided an inspirational keynote address about caring for other teachers, especially our new teachers, but mostly about reaching our students. She started by talking about how she loved teaching English, but she really loved teaching students.

"You have to bait the hook, you have to throw it in. You have to catch that fish. Do whatever you can to hook that fish," she said. On Saturday, the full day started with a talk by Emily Kirkpatrick, Executive Director of NCTE, about national data and tools that are being developed and implemented to address membership challenges. According to data from a 2016 national survey, people join professional organizations for a handful of prevalent reasons including networking with others in their field and learning best practices or continuing education.

Affiliates from all the regions of NCTE joined this discussion by sharing what they are doing to increase and retain memberships. Strategies and pitfalls were shared with a focus on the message of the importance of professional organizations. As we talked about our own affiliates, I reflected how MATELA has fulfilled both of those objectives for me, both networking and continuing education. I also thought about ways we can provide more opportunities for networking and education for our members here in Montana.

One way to provide opportunities for networking and education for members is through social media. A presentation focused on that, with follow up from three affiliates. This reminded me about MATELA's social media presence, which includes Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They all provide ways to connect with your peers in a casual and fun way.



Teachers discussed ideas on using social media to network.

A session on scholarly journals focused on modern approaches, and the three representatives from MATELA were invited to talk about what we do in Montana to meet the needs of members in a geographically large state with our nationally recognized publications. Smaller break-out sessions focused on diversity programs, affiliate newsletters, and every day advocacy. The day ended with regional meetings.

Our last day in Atlanta was highlighted with an in-depth look at intellectual freedom cases and the advocacy that has been provided by both NCTE and state affiliates. It was both shocking and reassuring to hear how book challenges unfolded in various places and how support existed for the students, teachers, schools, districts, and states to assure that students retained the right to read and teachers retained the right to teach.

Another bright spot was a presentation of projects and vision statements from the 2017 NCTE Early Career Educators of Color award winners. These inspiring educators from across the United States shared their plans for projects that would make a difference in their own schools and districts.

This brought me back to one of the recurring themes of the meeting, the support we can, as educators, provide to one another, especially to our young teachers. Earlier in the day, we had responded to a writing prompt about encouraging new teachers. Even though I am starting my 25th year of teaching this fall, many of these words will serve me well in the school year to come, words such as "kids are our collaborators" and "remember to fuel the fire that brought you into education" and "teach with your heart--lead your classroom with passion and purpose. Everything else will fall into place."

And, finally, as we navigate the stormy seas that often seem to characterize education, I leave readers with this advice given by one of the presenters: "Stay on the boat. Get a life preserver, but stay on the boat." ♦

PRESERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION

Confluence: Merging Rural Perceptions, Experiences for New Teachers

Grant Makes Possible Interactive Practicum with Rural Component

By Allison Wynhoff Olsen, Danette Long, & Nigel Waterton

As members of MATELA, we are eager to share our recent experiences with pre-service teachers: those who will soon be applying for teaching jobs across the state of Montana and beyond (many of whom are presenting at MEA-MFT this fall).

As a result of a grant won by Education department members Joe Hicks, John Melick, and Tina Versland and Nick Lux, 13 secondary education majors at Montana State University enrolled in an intensive practicum course with a rural component. Twelve of these students were English education majors, so we three co-authors were invited to join this practicum group.

We three are part of a team focused on English education at Montana State University: one English education professor (Wynhoff Olsen), one education professor (Nigel Waterton), and one field supervisor/doctoral student (Danette Long).

Currently, MSU is what we call a “rural think tank,” with myriad professors actively engaged in various emphases related to Montana’s ruralities. Our collective recognition of the innovations and opportunities rural communities afford, as well as a commitment to prepare our pre-service teachers for teaching experiences across Montana school class sizes, allows us opportunities to collaborate across departments in innovative ways.

Rural emphasis is also present in conversations across our state. “In August, 2016 the Montana University System Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education assembled the first ever MUS Educator Recruitment and Retention task force.

It is our hope that by sharing some of our reflections and our students’ experiences, we can continue to build collaborations with English teachers across the state who may be interested in partnering with us and our students.

Two questions guide the remainder of this article and our own curiosities: (1) How do pre-service teachers construct notions of



Photo by Rachel Humphreys

Photo of the confluence of rivers where the practicum teachers lived and worked.

rural in an intensive practicum experience? (2) What is the role of community during a rural practicum intensive and how does that inform Montana’s English Education community?

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MSU’s rural practicum intensive was an alternative to a traditional practicum course. In an effort to create rural exposures and opportunities (rather than our typical school placements near our university town), this intensive practicum allowed students to teach in and experience rural communities and schools, while situated in a university community as a “home-base.” Grant funds also paid students’ tuition and travel expenses.

Before students travelled to Northeastern Montana for practicum, we asked them to write their definitions of rural. Our Montana students defined rural as “remote locations with a relatively sparse human population” and noted “anything more than 50 miles from

major services” and “less than 100 people per square mile.” Our students who grew up in rural communities (both within MT and in neighboring states) nuanced the definition more: “Rural communities are also more associated with agriculture-based economies and pastimes” and “Rural is having to travel for sports, shopping, etc. We measure travel by hours, not by miles.” And one

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Nervous Practicum Students Wonder if They Will ‘Stick out like a Sore Thumb’ in Rural Communities

rural Montana student wrote an emotional definition: “Rural is the place I call home....Rural is a tight knit community and family.” Our students who grew up far from these rural communities--such as California and the East Coast--contrasted their own experiences as they defined rural. For them, rural communities were made up of people with “conservative philosophies” and “anything less than 10,000 people within an area.”

We also asked our students if they had spent time in Northeastern Montana prior to practicum: eight had and five had not. When asked what made them nervous, students expressed concerns of fitting in, feeling like “an outsider coming in and intruding on their classroom” as well as being “nervous that I am going to stick out like a sore thumb.” Another was “worried that I may experience a significant degree of prejudice/respect issues” because he believed that his identity aligns more typically with more urban areas. Overall, our students were concerned about how and if the students and communities would accept them for their short stay.

Experience has taught us that community serves a vital role in any practicum setting. A supportive community nurtures students and



Photo by Darci Petersen

THE LOCKERS ARE LOCKLESS: This photo indicates the pre-service teacher’s new-found awareness of the rural school community in which she was placed: no lockers are needed to protect items and keep them secure; they are safe the way they are.

“[The practicum] changed my mind about maybe pursuing a career in a rural environment.”

Pre-Service Teacher
Practicum Participant

allows them to use their education theory to blossom into practicing teachers. Clinical field supervisors work diligently to create a strong sense of community with and among their students; however, community development can be difficult in a traditional setting. Students, still juggling class schedules, jobs, and homework, must add in time to commute to a new school, which can be over an hour from campus, multiple times a week. While it is possible to build community under these conditions, it can be difficult. There is little time for genuine collaboration and discussion of the teaching experience beyond weekly class meetings or scheduled observations. Conversely, in our rural practicum experience, community (in its many forms) developed quickly and naturally.

According to our students, the community during the rural practicum was “awesome” and “super appreciated.” The sense of community that students reported developing in all areas: with classroom students, cooperating teachers, other school personnel, MSU faculty, and their peers was greatly intensified due to the condensed nature of the experience. Students particularly appreciated the ability to be in their classrooms for the entire day. One student reported he felt he was “able to bond” with his CT and students more quickly in the full-day, continuous placement than had he been in a traditional setting, where they usually attend only two-three hours at a time, two-three times a week. The students also appreciated the ability to see “every grade group, 7-12” that the rural schools afforded rather than only one or two class periods. One student felt the experience “changed my mind about maybe pursuing a career in a rural environment,” stating he found it “professionally rewarding,” and that he enjoyed “not teaching the same lesson over and over.”

Housing students in one central location was purposeful; but it had other positive impacts. At one time in the planning, faculty considered housing students closer to the towns in which they would teach to reduce their commutes; however, in the end they decided to have us all stay in one central location. That decision was probably one of the most important ones made. The strength of the resulting informal learning community that developed during the experience surprised everyone. The hotel’s lobby lounge quickly developed

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Immersion in Rural Schools Provides Practical Practicum

into a shared community space where students, clinical field supervisor, and university faculty met regularly for pre- and post-observation conferences, end-of-day sharing, and to workshop lesson plans and complete assignments such as daily journal entries and the required Teacher Work Sample. Each night we dined together, laughed together, worked together, and learned together as we bonded through this experience. One student, looking around the lounge one evening, commented, “We just kinda took over, didn’t we?” The hotel amenities allowed everyone to de-stress, relax and rejuvenate for the next day. Pool basketball quickly became a favorite activity to cap each evening. Given the intensity of this practicum, our students felt firsthand the sense of a rural “tight-knit” community and were welcomed in seven Northeastern school districts: a reality they still speak of with appreciation.

At the confluence of our students’ rural perceptions and experiences, community forged the necessary connections for them to tackle the practicum experience and excel in their new identities as practicing teachers. The collegial, rural, and practicum student communities also helped us witness the process of our students’ immersion into a variety of rural school contexts. When embedded in their respective communities, students began to question the conventional perception “...that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds...” (Schafft & Jackson, 2010). An example of one student’s observation from within his practicum community:

The school is indeed the heart of the community...the school is able to be flexible to the needs of the students and the community uses the school events, like the graduation, to come together and celebrate the successes in their students and how they have grown in the community and what they mean to the survival of the community.

These collisions of rural perceptions and the lived experiences helped faculty and students see the potential for a model of immersed practical experience (Wiggin, Follo, & Eberly, 2007) that

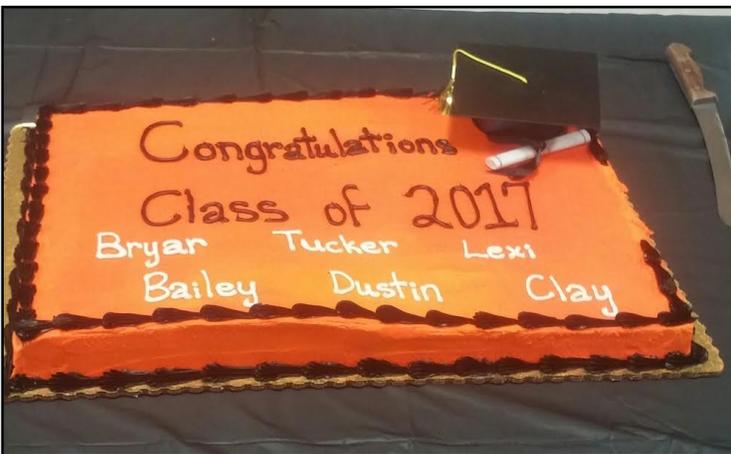


Photo by Joseph Wirtz

Graduation cake for the Savage class of 2017.

supports a culturally sustainable pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and merits further investigation through implementing this model for rural practicum field experiences. Such opportunities help us consider how we can more meaningfully prepare students to be new teachers in various schools across Montana.

Given the opportunities for mentorship and connections throughout the MATELA community, we are interested in thinking about how we can carve out more ways for our pre-service teachers to engage in this organization. We are encouraged by the ways we observed our students participating in professional dialogue with teachers during their practicum experience and appreciate their honesty as they made themselves vulnerable. As students constructed their notions of rural, they helped us gain understanding into their dispositions and considerations of what it means to be an English teacher in Montana. ♦

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