Teacher, Writer, Researcher

Connecticut Writing Project
Storrs

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Director's Corner

By Jason Courtemanche

What a bizarre end of the semester. I feel saddest for the high school seniors—no graduation, no prom, no senior outing, no spring sports. It was sad, too, to see so many programs be cancelled. We had to cancel celebrations for the Scholastic Writing Awards, Letters About Literature, and Connecticut Student Writers Recognition Night. The English Department had to cancel the Early College Experience English Spring Workshop, the First-Year Writing Program's Conference on the Teaching of Writing, and the Aetna Celebration of Student Writing. Also canceled were the Black Girl Magic presentations, the Leadership In Diversity Conference, the Pre-College Summer at UConn, the National Writing Project Northeast Regional Sites Conference, the CCCC Summer Conference at Boston University, and the NCTE Leadership Summit in DC.

But we all had to adapt and endure, and perhaps we earned a little well-deserved respect from parents and students, alike. One of the most interesting outgrowths to me is that the crisis has forced us as educators to take a long look at our priorities, and decide that mental health, family, and intellectual engagement were more important than assessments, grades, and rank. The Department of Education officially urged schools to place more emphasis on engagement than grades, and most schools and colleges have moved to Pass/Fail, at least as an option.

I hope we are able to physically return to school in the fall, but I also hope we remember what we learned from this about what is really important in teaching and learning.

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Marc Zimmerman

By Olivia Grossman

Marc Zimmerman, a former teacher at Bristol High School, has recently made a decisive transition from public school to teaching at Tunxis Community College in Farmington, CT. Zimmerman is a passionate teacher whose primary concern is the development and growth of his students. He has always been interested in education, and has been teaching for 21 years. When asked if he could ever imagine doing something else, he said "I don't ever see myself leaving it . . . Education is my life." He has carried that ardor all throughout his career as a high school English teacher but claimed by the end he simply could not overlook what he believed the system has turned into. He feels it is primarily about numbers now, getting students grades, graduation rates, and exam scores up in order to reflect well on the budget and district. As a trade off for good numbers, some administrations have sacrificed "individual style and construction" and in turn have become more "district based and less student to teacher based." Zimmerman adamantly promotes challenging his students and helping them develop critical skills, which--especially in English--is difficult to measure in a number.

Within his new position, Zimmerman started teaching developmental level English and has since moved into Composition I with workshop and 3-credit Composition II. Upon beginning his new career path, he said he wants to bring in "more discussion about rhetoric, which is more challenging. I want my students to move beyond what the author is initially saying, to 'how do I interact with the text?' and 'what are the author's methods?' This makes better readers and writers, and is a critical skill that can be applied to our democratic process today."

When asked about the transition to college-level teaching, Zimmerman appeared enthusiastic and hopeful. On top of his criticisms of the public-school system, he also believed that moving to college instruction would provide "more professional development and opportunities for myself...and a lot more autonomy." Though the change was not easy, and he felt as if he were "leaving a 21-year relationship," he appeared to be much happier with the switch as he has more flexibility to employ his own preferred teaching methods, instead of being so restricted by numbers. Despite the newness of the position, he is already more comfortable at Tunxis and plans to stay at the college level indefinitely.

> "Whatever field you're in, you have to understand how to read and think carefully and critically. It overlaps into every other aspect of your learning and your life."

Zimmerman shared with me one of his fondest memories as a teacher, 12 years ago when he conducted a seminar on the nature of forgiveness. He encouraged a student to support the opposite side than what she believed, and afterwards she thanked him for challenging her to think in a different way. It is moments like these that validate Zimmerman's fervent passion for what he does, and inspires him to continue on his track. For future teachers, he advised them to "seek out a mentor who loves what they do and are passionate about it...that is what will give you longevity." Zimmerman believes in the importance of what he is teaching and how it goes beyond the classroom. "Whatever field you're in, " he says, "you have to understand how to read and think carefully and critically. It overlaps into every other aspect of your learning and your life."

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John Wetmore

By Olivia Grossman

John Wetmore is a talented teacher who has worked at Manchester High School for seven years, but recently took a brief respite from the job. When asked why he left his teaching position for a while, Wetmore cited the main reason as burnout. The workload itself was becoming too taxing, as he had "10 different courses to prep for," after-school meetings for various programs, on top of maintaining his own classroom: "I realized I was doing 1 ½ jobs for no extra pay." The chief crux of the issue, however, wasn't just the workload but the emotional weight that was gathering on his shoulders. "Education has shifted toward social emotional learning," Wetmore said, "and it's good to connect more with students and build personal relationships...but it takes a toll [on the teacher], especially in creative writing where a lot of personal stuff comes out. Being party to all that trauma is a lot for one person to handle." Now that he's back in his old position teaching 9th grade English and an 11th grade LENS course (American literature through various lenses), he wants to work on "establishing good boundaries" to better help his students but also protect his own mental well-being.

Wetmore became involved in education because he got a "look at what good school and good teachers can do...towards the end of my high school career it really turned me around as a person." Though his time off was necessary, it also made him realize he missed the "level of intellectual engagement" that teaching provides. Despite the valid reasons for his departure, he still felt he had "unfinished business" and reasoned that teaching was still more "meaningful and purposeful than other jobs" that he had tried out.

Since picking up where he left off, he feels it was the right decision and cannot imagine straying far from the educational career path again. He wants to "get back into the swing of things" and upon his return, hopes to continue to "bring students to that authentic learning experience. As pacing of curriculum is becoming more rigorous, it can be difficult for teachers to plan things like field trips, project-based learning, etc.... These might not be traditional ways to teach but are still enriching learning experiences." The time off appears to have instilled a renewed vigor in his passion for helping students enjoy learning beyond the conventional classroom methods, and he is approaching his old position with fresh eyes and enthusiasm for his work.

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Wetmore described several programs Manchester High initiates that he believes are beneficial to the overall learning environment. He works with Amanda Navarra, who is the instructional coach at the school and works collaboratively with teachers to "figure out the needs of the student population and what strategies can be used to better their learning." Navarra helps to "advocate for teachers who want to do things specific to their students," which Wetmore adamantly supported and says is a great asset to the educational community.

When asked if he had any advice for upcoming teachers, Wetmore suggested to "find the people that you respect and who really care about their kids...those people, at the toughest times, are the ones who will lift you up and recognize the good work you're doing." Wetmore appears to be one of these people himself, and admirably advocates for both student development as well as that of the educators.

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Megan O'Connor

By Olivia Grossman

Megan O'Connor is a graduate student in the NEAG program at UCONN, and demonstrates the promising characteristics of becoming a competent and passionate future English teacher. As a member of the LGBTQ community and a student teacher in Hartford, CT, O'Connor hopes to use her platform as an educator to promote inclusivity among the youth.

O'Connor recently had an article published in the English Journal about coming out to her students, detailing both the difficulties of the experience and the implications afterwards. In her article, O'Connor talks about some of the struggles she wrestled with in reconciling two parts of her identity. She writes, "distancing my gayness from my goal of educating my students about the LGBTQ community felt safer, more 'professional.' It also, however, made me feel like a fraud, like I was turning my back on my community." Though some months have passed since she first talked about this struggle, O'Connor claims this is something she is still wrestling with. "It's definitely going to be a continuing tension when it comes to being a teacher, especially a new teacher," she says. "I think I need to sacrifice feeling safe to actually make a difference. I need to get that voice out there to give representation for my students."

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O'Connor is passionate about doing her part to create an inclusive environment for all students. Both in her article and in our interview she talked adamantly about combining the concept of educator and activist together. Once she moves beyond student teaching into her own classroom, she wants "to be a leader in creating an environment that is inclusive to LGBTQ and to all students in general. I want to provide that representation." When asked what kind of steps she might take to accomplish this, she mentioned being involved in professional development initiatives such as "GSA (Gay Straight Alliance), which I helped run during my time as a student teacher." The GSA is a student-run organization that provides a safe space for LGBTQ students in schools. O'Connor also emphasized the importance of empowering her students to stand up for any level of injustice. "If a student says 'that's gay' I try to call out homophobia when I see it, but also explain why it's wrong to say things like that. Getting that conversation started amongst students is really important."

Outside of her commendable work as a voice for LGBTQ students, O'Connor is also extremely passionate about English education. She says she "always loved reading and writing" and became close with some of her English teachers in high school. These special teacher-student relationships are what finally solidified O'Connor's decision to become an English teacher. When listening to her talk about her career path and inspiration, it is clear O'Connor hopes to apply that extra layer of connection in her classroom. She is interested in emphasizing both learning content, as well as going the extra mile to establish positive relationships with her students.

Megan O'Connor (continued)

Rather than approach learning in the traditional lecture format, O'Connor is interested in "educational reform and making education more project-based learning." During her student teaching in Hartford, she actively tried to engage her students and help them enjoy the assignments. "Giving students a choice is a big thing I believe in. I try to make learning as authentic as possible, and also try to allow a variety of abilities, talents and interests in the classroom. I want to give my students the opportunity to connect their interests with English." For example, one project she assigned asked students to "weave personal narrative and research driven writing based on their identity. They were doing the same skills as a research paper, but it was more engaging because it was about themselves." O'Connor's idea was met with success, and she happily reported there was "a level of motivation I had never seen with teaching students' writing." O'Connor will take experiences such as these and apply them to a future classroom of her own, continuing to inspire and engage her students.

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NCTE National Council of Teachers of English

Megan O'Connor's article, "Visibility as Activism: The Choice to Be 'Out' in the Teaching Profession" can be found at ncte.org under "English Journal" September 2019

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E-Learning:
A Crisis or an Opportunity?

By Samantha Vanvalkenburg

This year of 2020 will go down in history for the COVID-19 pandemic that caused the closure of our businesses, jobs, restaurants, and our schools. This forced teachers across the country to suddenly and completely transition to online learning. The switch exposes a unique opportunity to reach out to educators and investigate the learning tools and techniques they are taking advantage of in their classrooms and how they and their students are adapting. CWP was fortunate enough to connect with three of our dedicated teachers and bring forth their insights and experiences.

Three Perspectives on the Switch to E-learning

Karen Adrian, at St. Christopher middle, noticed that her students are not used to the amount of ownership of their responsibilities required to make online learning work. "Their motivation has always been extrinsic," she says remarking on their new responsibilities, "and now that's not working for them." The observation indicates an interesting flaw in the learning environment students are used to where most are accustomed to waking at a certain time, attending class now, doing homework later ... No wonder transitions to university can be so startling to teenagers. Perhaps this realization will encourage us all to think of new ways to enforce intrinsic motivation that will help our students learn and grow far after and far from us.

Karen's strategy for encouraging accountability is assigning a piece of homework everyday with an extended due date. She also switched from having letter grades to Pass/ Resubmit (instead of pass/fail) as a way of ensuring students are, "mastering a skill or standard rather than simply submitting assignments just to get them done."

In contrast, Karen also noted that the new flexibility is allowing other students to truly thrive. Kids know their bodies and they need breaks, some more than others. Using schoology, Karen noticed that many of her 504 students would start and stop work at various times of the day. She pointed out that this is actually a really great benefit of the online learning process. Kids can take necessary breaks for medication, movement, sleep, food, etc to reboot and not worry, "because they're able to access the lessons any time in the day." This finding is quite remarkable; it's a reminder of the benefits of incorporating breaks and pacing in our lessons.

SAINT
CHRISTOPHER
SCHOOL

E-Learning (continued)

Instead of starting from scratch, as many teachers felt pressured to do with the switch to e-learning, Makenzie Aitchison, at E.O. Smith High, decided to keep with the same structure just using online tools. In fact, it would seem that switching to online tools has helped her individualize and differentiate learning for her students more. "I became a virtual Penny Kittle," Makenzie reflects, "conferencing with an average of 15 students per day via Zoom and Google Docs. I am cycling through my students' documents from morning to mid-afternoon, and they are receiving detailed feedback daily!" However, the other side to that coin is juggling roughly 95 students all with varying needs, abilities, access, and questions.

One thing Makenzie tries to keep in mind is patience. She knows some of her kids do not have the best, "home environment conducive to learning." She recognizes that students may have limited access to the work she is putting out, or other siblings to teach, or responsibilities at home with this pandemic making a lot of the student workers the only source of income to their families. We are all doing our best to accommodate, so Makanzie keeps an open-mind and an open-heart with her students.

While recognizing the loss her students are going through (not having prom, sports games, theater, graduation, etc), Amy Nocton, at E.O. Smith High, kept up momentum by going with projects inspired by new technology and current events. As a language teacher at E.O. Smith, she combats inconsistency of student accountability by making work available for the entirety of the week with email reminders to the students and parents. She also sets up a weekly survey as a way of checking in on her students' and getting feedback. When it comes to assignments, the work is quite relevant. Recently, Amy asked her Spanish class to record their own tongue twisters in Spanish. "It has been hilarious," she writes, "and most of the students agree as you can hear them laughing throughout their attempts!" As a way of encouraging their efforts, Amy is participating in the assignments as well! She sent her own recording of a Spanish tongue twister and created a post on their classroom blog. Most interestingly, Amy is now using the pandemic to propel her UConn ECE course into their Media Literacy Unit.

EDWIN O. SMITH
HIGH SCHOOL

"I have never spent so much time looking at my laptop in my life!"

It's no wonder since she is doing her best to be there for her students and colleagues in every way possible. Amy feels the loss of not being around kids she grew to know so well over the years. The distance is putting a damper on the whole situation, but when even one student lights up to see your face in a zoom meeting again, it makes a world of a difference. That's all the reminder she needs to keep her, "head above water and [let] the students know that I am flexible, I am available, I miss them, and I care about the challenges they are facing."

E-Learning (continued)

New Tools

The severity and sudden emergence of this pandemic disrupted all of our lives. The immediate and complete switch to online learning caught us all off-guard by having to find and familiarize ourselves with all new learning tools and techniques. Here is a compiled list of digital learning sites that helped these teachers stay connected and on top of their new workload.

- Zoom: a source for video communication
- Google Classroom: a learning management system for sharing content and resources
- Google Meets: a source for video communication
- Google Docs: a learning tool for student work, assessments, and projects
- Schoology: a learning management system for sharing content and resources
- Screencastify: A screen recorder
- Remind101: a communication platform
- Email: a communication platform
- No Red Ink: a language-learning platform for grammar and writing skills
- KQED Learn: a learning platform for media literacy and critical thinking skills
- Moby Max: a learning platform designed to close learning gaps
- Discovery Education: A site for digital content and professional development
- Safe YouTube: a site for school-appropriate content

While these resources worked for the contributing teachers, they may not work for you. The important thing to keep in mind is to find ones that fit your needs and your comfort level.

E-Learning (continued)

Importance of Reflection

Every teacher in some way alluded to the overall goal of all these strategies: connection. Feeling connected to your students and your team is part of what will get everyone through this difficult time. In the face of all these changes, a hybrid strategy works best to keep in touch with your students and peers rather than a completely asynchronous schedule. Additionally, many schools are holding weekly or even daily meetings to compensate for not seeing each other face to face.

The major change exposed significant wins and losses for our students. While some are rejoicing over the flexibility of online learning, others are facing issues of access head on. The digital divide is more prominent than ever with many of our students having to cope without access to internet, transportation, or technology that would connect them to this new way of teaching. Schools promptly responded by lending out laptops and hotspots to those in need, but access remains to be a problem not yet fully realized or addressed.

Times like these remind us of how much the world of education must continuously evolve. We are educators. This is a learning experience. Together we can manage and together we can grow. While all our efforts are well-intended and mindful, they can also be relatively overwhelming and stress-inducing. From CWP to you, remember to treat yourself every now and again. Self-care keeps us healthy and keeps us going. Go workout, read a book, write a poem, take a walk... whatever you need to do to appreciate the small things in life so you can make big things happen for you and your students.

A note from the teachers

Karen says
"Don't stop building and encouraging relationships with the kids. I hate feeling so disconnected from them, so I go on every day regardless of how much I hate the way I look on video, and am there physically for them because they, too, are isolated."
Makenzie says
"...this just does not come close to what we are able to achieve in the true classroom environment."
"Keep students moving forward!"
Amy says
"¡Si se puede! and Andrà tutto bene!
(At least, I hope. ¡Ojalá! Magari!)"

Violet Sims

By Julianna Iacovelli

Violet Jiménez Sims is the new blood the Neag School of Education desperately needs. Sims joined the program this year as an Assistant Clinical Professor in Curriculum and Instruction. For the past 18 years, she has taught everything from kindergarten classrooms to the university level. Due to the current pandemic (wash your hands people!), my interview with Sims was conducted over email. So, I did what I can only assume every journalist does--I googled her. Sims has an impressive academic history. She has a doctorate in Educational Leadership, a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies (Sixth Year) in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration on Bilingual and Multicultural Education, a Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration, and a Bachelor of Arts in Theater Studies. With all of these fancy degrees, she has dedicated her life to diversity, as well as culturally and linguistically responsive spaces in the classroom.

Due to her new position at the University of Connecticut, Violet Sims is busy with a capital B-- so it's no surprise that it took me a couple of times to get noticed in her overflowing inbox. Pandemic aside, our email interview was successful!

As I mentioned, Sims is practically overflowing with degrees. When she got her Educational Leadership doctorate, her coursework essentially consisted of, "curriculum, school improvement, school law, and special education, as well as the methods and research courses required for the doctorate (and ultimately a dissertation)." As part of the program, she researched professional development for culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, she stated that this was her own choice as she is interested in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students. Sims is committed to multicultural education, meaning "deliberately incorporating and representing people from different cultural backgrounds in every aspect, resource, and platform used to deliver said education; ensuring that a dominant culture is not emphasized." Sims is working against there being a dominant culture in the classroom, and championing inclusive spaces.

> "By teaching writing, we give people a voice and an opportunity to tell their stories."

I was recently accepted into the Neag School of Education, so I asked Sims for some advice. I asked her how we include the act of teaching writing in the push for social justice. She said that, "By teaching writing, we give people a voice and an opportunity to tell their stories. As long as the writing instruction is delivered in a CLR manner, it is one of the most impactful ways to empower people, and in turn, foster social justice." CLR stands for culturally and linguistically responsive, this interview was the first time I've heard of the term. Sims says, "everyone's unique voice is heard, valued, and included rather than expecting non-dominant identities to adhere to the expectations of the dominant culture and language in order to be successful. In CLR spaces, multilingualism and multiculturalism are seen through an asset rather than a deficit lens." She stressed the importance of teaching books with diverse characters "of different nationalities/ethnicities, girls/women in leadership roles, bilingual texts, etc. It's important that books with characters of color aren't limited to biographies of prominent historical figures, but also include stories of everyday POC doing everyday things." She went on to say that there is not an exact recipe for creating CLR spaces, but a teacher needs to make an educated and informed effort in order to promote an inclusive environment.

Connecticut Student Writers Reading Day

By Julianna Iacovelli and Samantha Vanvalkenburg

On Saturday February 8th, the University of Connecticut hosted a reading day for The CWP's annual Connecticut Student Writers Contest. CWP received over 1,500 submissions from Connecticut K-12 students. These submissions spanned everything from fiction, humor, and journalism to memoir and artwork. It gave the opportunity for students to have their work published in a magazine and honored statewide. This event also allowed professionals of education from all over the state to collaborate on reviewing and scoring the writings of our youth.

Jason Courtmanche, Director of the CWP, coordinated the event reaching across all networks and people together that were both familiar and new to the CWP community. This aspect of the work allows people to create new connections and gain new perspectives. The teachers worked from 9 am to 3 pm reading all of the submissions individually and gave a score from 0 to 10. Having the teachers work together to get through the mass of submissions really gave the room a sense of comradery.

A new participant to this year's contest, Marc Zimmerman, thoroughly enjoyed being able to experience writing from ages and ability levels that he does not always get to work with as a professor at Tunxis Community College. Like most people, Mark was introduced to CWP through the Summer Institute in 2016. For him, the value of this experience is that it forces him to reflect on the efforts that can be made to make evaluation of writing more qualitative.

Kelly Andrews-Babcock offers more input through her years of experience, having worked alongside Jason for at least thirteen years now. She values the conversations that arise year after year from the teachers that congregate for this event. For instance, in a conversation between Jason, Kelly, and Marcy Rudge (the "most beloved whack-a-doo of leadership team") there arose the reflection that these kinds of contests can and are meant to inspire teacher introspection. Teachers should ask themselves how their actions contribute to the results of their students' submission. What are they doing right? What can they be doing better? The true beauty of these contests, Kelly says, is that, "teachers get excited to encourage kids writing."

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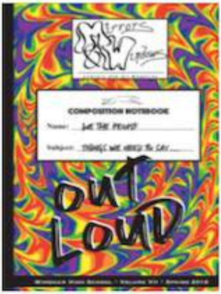
NCTE Literary Magazine

By Samantha Vanvalkenburg

Each year NCTE awards several outstanding high schools for the composition and creativity of their Literary Magazine through the REALM program (Recognizing Excellence in Art and Literary Magazines). The competition evaluates each magazine based on their content and quality; rhetorical variety; editing and proofreading; artistic quality; and front matter, and pagination. Judges then rank the work into different levels of excellence. Connecticut is fortunate enough to have not one, not two, but three outstanding CWP alumni recognized this year.

Dara Bowling

Advisor for the Windham High School's 'Mirrors and Windows' Literary Magazine



Having received the ranking of Excellent last year, Dara and her students are incredibly excited and proud to be recognized as Superior for their 2019 edition. This achievement was not without extreme effort and flexibility to evolve the magazine and the club to where it is today.

Dara started at Windham High School 11 years ago when the literary magazine was under a different name and produced with limited resources. To modernize the new project, Dara took her students of the time to book stores and asked them to use anything and everything they saw as inspiration. The design idea for creating a digital composition notebook initially came from a poster at Barnes & Nobles. In addition to broadening the magazine's conceptual capacity, Dara also expanded the range of tools used for physically creating it. Using mostly Adobe, she works side-by-side with the students to familiarize them with the platform and develop digital literacy skills with them. While funding remains a challenge, nothing beats the pride and feeling of accomplishment on proof day as the kids make their final edits. Reflecting on the misjudgment of WHS students by the town, Dara remarks, "I love having the kids throw these achievements back in the face of all that!"

It's that kind of dedication and encouragement which really allows students to explore their own creative abilities. Over time, Dara's involvement has transitioned from director, to facilitator, to mediator of a student-run organization.

Student-choice gets incorporated into as many elements of the product as possible. For instance, the title and theme of the 2019 edition, "Out Loud", came from the overwhelming popularity of Shaun David Hutchinson (author of We Are The Ants) who encouraged them to "speak out loud" on issues of diversity. They independently decided to create a subtle narrative woven into the margins through doodles that symbolically connect the featured works. Over the years, the students have increasingly taken ownership of the magazine and decided to include all forms of student work. This pushed them to get creative by adding QR codes and images of work that couldn't simply be scanned into the magazine. The club actively encourages multimodal, multi-lingual, multi-dimensional submissions to represent their school.

Ultimately, this magazine is something the student body depends on now. It brings great pride to their school and demonstrates "la familia." "That's not just something we say," says Dara, "we give the phrase meaning." The magazine acts as a unifier of ability and reinforces the unity of the school.

Dara admires that the end product screams, "This is who we are – take it or leave it." It's clear that, for Dara, the real achievement is the physical evidence of her students believing in themselves and in their voice.

NCTE Literary Magazine (continued)

Laureen Anthony

Advisor for Griswold High School's
'Hodiernal' Literary Magazine

This being the first ever attempt at organizing, conceptualizing, managing, and producing a magazine really emphasizes the significance of earning an Excellent REALM Award for GHS's 2019 edition. "It was like hitting a home run with your first rookie at-bat," describes Laureen. This recognition truly reinforces their efforts at promoting student engagement and school-wide pride.

Approached by their students, Laureen and her colleague, Ryan Fitzsimmons, took up the great challenge to facilitate their school's literary magazine. Language and graphic arts worked side-by-side to generate this celebration of student work. Laureen is incredibly proud of contributing work that shines light on her literary and visually artistic students. She also admires how well the project works in conjunction to her other endeavors, giving her another tool to encourage and publicize works from poetry contests and her creative writing class.

Still very young in the development of the club, a challenge they face will be getting a consistent influx of participants to whom they can pass on the activity. Laureen was prepped and ready to dive into another great year of memory-making, but production ceased during the school closure of 2020. However, this delay will not discourage their future efforts, as Laureen fully intends to "ramp up the magazine" once it is safe again to do so.

"GHS already has a very favorable view of the arts due to our musical program; this will extend the arts to visual and literary student work, too!"

Laureen is very excited about this adventure and intends to grow the hope and pride that already inspires so many students.

NCTE Literary Magazine (continued)

Mandy Flachsbart

Advisor for South Windsor High School's 'Mind's Eye' Literary Magazine

Much like Laureen, the 2019 edition was Mandy's first trial in advising her schools literary Magazine again making the Excellent REALM Award that much more impressive. Taking over a preexisting club wasn't easy, especially with having to find almost all new student-members, but "I was really lucky," says Mandy. She was able to encourage 6 students to consistently work on the project who became "integral to our success".

Mind's Eye Literary and Art Magazine

[illegible]

Mandy's club actively encourages young writers by holding "Coffee Houses" or open-mic-nights for students to share poetry, art, prose, music, etc. This has become a widely welcomed, student-run event at the end of each of their quarters. "They truly have cultivated a safe space where everyone feels supported," admires Mandy. In fact, when the REALM announcement came out, it was celebrated by members of both the club and Coffee House.

Yet, students are still hesitant to submit their work to the magazine because it means publishing to an even wider audience. That gives the magazine an added layer of significance as a tool that could reduce general and individual insecurities. This is why Mandy and the club took up the initiative to distribute the print out more as a way of generating excitement and associating pride with publication.

Participating in healthy competition and reaching out in the ways that the club has helps to make the magazine feel like a whole school effort. Mandy and her students will be using the momentum of the award to broaden the range of student work in their product. "I want our next magazine to have more diverse genres," say Mandy, "and I'd love to work on incorporating multimodal pieces." With the unfortunate school closure, Mandy is hoping that her students are up for the challenge of going completely digital with this year's production.

Congratulations to all!

To check out all of Connecticut's winners, click here, and for more information on how to get your school involved in this amazing program,

click here.

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Amy Nocton

By Julianna Iacovelli

Amy Nocton has been working at E.O. Smith High School (which is basically on UConn's campus) since 2016. Nocton has been a Spanish and Italian educator for over 20 years. She holds a master's in Spanish from Middlebury College, a Master's of Education from the University of Hartford, and a Master's in International Studies from the University of Connecticut. She also teaches first-year writing and non-native English at UConn. I had the pleasure of interviewing her over email after several missed connections between us over the phone and in person. As many of you know, Amy is married to Jason Courtmanche, CWP director. In the beginning of this email interview, she told me that she was watching Mulan for the first time with her daughter so it might seem a bit scatterbrained. This small funny anecdote, I think, personally encapsulates how she is able to balance everything in her life and still keep the plates all spinning.

In her high school Spanish class, Nocton does not simply drone out phrases like "donde esta la biblioteca?" from a textbook and hope it sticks. Her classes use technology and tactics such as blogs, podcasts, theatre, and writing competitions. Nocton also integrates social justice into her lessons around Latin American history. Every year in her UConn ECE class her students study the impact of Lain American dictatorships, and then they speak to experts about how people were directly affected. "Last June, my ECE students spoke to the Vice President of El Salvador via Skype. In his interview with us, VP Félix Ulloa spoke to us about why he was moved to enter politics (to carry out the work of his father who was rector of the university and was assassinated for his fight for social justice)." In her other classes, she makes sure to show documentaries and study political and cultural events. As a senior project advisor, she also encourages her students to "work locally to engage in local social justice projects." Pre-corona, The Hartford Courant was going to run one of her students' Fresh Talk piece about food insecurity, the student is now taking the time to make more revisions.

Nocton is also incredibly involved in E.O. Smith's extracurricular life. She oversees the Democratic Discourse and Deliberation club where she works with about 80 students to moderate discussions on difficult topics. "Two years ago we held a discourse on mental health and wellness. Last year we looked at 21st Century Schools and this year we were focussing on empathy building." They also deliver professional development at Mansfield Middle School on race and race relations. She also runs E.O. Smith's Gay Straight Alliance.

Above all else, Amy Nocton praises the talented group of students and teachers she works and collaborates with. If I had a teacher like Amy in high school, I might actually have learned something in Spanish class, rather than dumping it all out of my brain three seconds after graduation. Amy is a teacher that makes you want to be a better student, not only because her lessons are engaging and interesting, but because you can see the effort and passion she puts into her teaching.

The CWP-Storrs, one of the oldest sites of the National Writing Project, was established at the University of Connecticut in 1982. Since 1986, the site has benefitted from funding from the Aetna Endowed Chair of Writing. Through its annual Invitational Summer Institute, the CWP offers opportunities for professional growth to teachers in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. Improving writing skills improves thinking skills and this leads to higher levels of achievement in all areas. In addition, the CWP offers professional development services to schools and school districts, and a variety of opportunities for students to publish their writing.

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