

Statement

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Expanding Literacies:

A Conversation
Between Three
Literacy Educators

Bud Hunt

Nannette McMurtry

Sarah Woodard

Shrimp and Literacies
by *Beth Cutter*

Increasing Students'
Reading Habits with
Informational Texts
by *Karen Buntinas*

The Writing Process in
Digital Media
by *Jon Ostenson*

Research:
(Con)fronting
Confusion
by *Sheryl Scales*

Columns:
YA Literature
by *Marge Freeburn and
Jessi Barrientos*

Erasmus and Digital
Mobility
by *Philippe Ernewein*

Why Invisible
Teaching Matters
by *Josh Curnett*

ELA in the 21st Century Digital Mobility: A Journey of a Thousand Miles Can Now Begin with a Single Click

by Philippe Ernewein



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The word grammar is used by language scholars to mean the description of the structure of a language and the system of rules that govern it. A grammar is like a basket that can hold sentences in that language which we all work. In earlier times language scholars confused writing with speech. This is evident in the word grammar itself – the Greek gramma means ‘letter’ with the root gerebh or grebh ‘to scratch’ (hence kerf, graph, carve). Grammar comes from gramma techne, ‘woven scratches.’ But it is quite clear that the primary existence of language (‘the tongue’) is in the event, the utterance. Language is not a carving, it’s a curl of breath, a breeze in the pines. (69)

From *The Practice of the Wild* by Gary Snyder

The Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, also known as Erasmus of Rotterdam, was one of those individuals who not only made tremendous contributions to the collective basket of literature during the 16th century, but also by his example encouraged people to actively lend their breath to the breeze in the pines by traveling. Erasmus, often called a Dutch Renaissance humanist, traveled extensively from his home country of the Netherlands to France, England, Switzerland, and Belgium. His mobility, accessible to only a privileged few during his lifetime, greatly influenced his perspective, learning, and understanding of the world as captured in his books, letters, and journals.

Today, Erasmus is the name of a student exchange program funded by the European Union (EU). Currently in its 25th year of existence, nearly three million students from across Europe have participated in a study or work abroad placement (more information at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-about-erasmus.htm>). While the name honors the spirit of Erasmus, it is also a backronym that stands for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students.

In an effort to encourage students to consider studying outside of their home countries, many university campuses in Europe organize International Days. Typically the three days prior to the end of a semester, teachers from

other countries are invited to lecture on topics related to a theme. As part of the International Days at K. H. Kempen University College in Belgium, I was invited to speak on topics about incorporating New Digital Media into classrooms and differentiating instruction.

The corresponding preparation and experience made me reflect deeply on my own learning. The language spoken on the network of campuses I visited in Belgium is Flemish, my first language. I learned English at age eight and did all my schooling after 2nd grade in the United States educational system. Although all lectures during the International Days are delivered in English, my goal was to deliver one in Flemish. During the preparation, I quickly realized that the vocabulary demands of my presentation greatly exceeded my second grade education. I was unable to retrieve words in Flemish like *noun*, *verb*, *differentiate*, *evaluate*, *analyze*, and *apply* out of my long-term memory, most likely because they never resided there in the first place.

Among the strategies I used to address my language deficit was to read articles and reports about teaching and learning in Flemish with a dictionary close at hand. Listening to podcasts and watching videos on YouTube in my native language also helped, but it was the interaction with text that had the greatest impact on learning new vocabulary for me. Paying close attention to what Gary Snyder calls the woven scratches helped me transfer new words into my vocabulary bank and then eventually, with much rehearsal, into language, into the curl of the breath.

While I was struggling with the code switching and translating of my ideas from English to Flemish, I thought about the experience the mostly English language learning students in the audience would be having as well. As students listened to lectures in English, there would be powerful meta-cognitive demands for them to categorize, translate, and interpret the incoming information.

What I first sensed during the preparation stage came to fruition during the actual delivery of the lectures. The exposure of a variety of international perspectives by the visiting team in a series of university lectures amounted to a type of transport, a cognitive transport. We were still physically in a small town in northern Belgium, but often with

stories, pictures and video clips, the students were brought to India, Turkey, Africa and the United States. Honoring the spirit of Erasmus and the International Days, students were moved beyond what has become perhaps familiar, assumed, and unquestioned and motivated to evaluate and consider ideas and questions from a different perspective.

While we cannot simply transport all our students to various locales around the world to participate in International Days or the Erasmus program, we can bring those places into our classrooms. Directly experiencing the wonderful exchanges of ideas among the international teams and having my own perspectives and opinions challenged made me think about how we can bring the core mission of Erasmus to our classrooms. As the world is rapidly changing, there are foundational elements that, most likely during our lifetime, will not change. Gary Snyder wrote, "As a poet I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Paleolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth; the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe." So to successfully understand the constantly changing parts of our world, our students must also have a strong foundational knowledge of what remains the same through the centuries. Perhaps in our classrooms it is not exactly the power-vision in solitude as Snyder writes about but the power of literature in all the mediums we encounter it today. As language arts teachers, we have a unique opportunity to bring this balanced approach to our classrooms. With the speed at which information is becoming available and the sheer volume of content that bombards us daily, it is easy to focus exclusively on the new and get caught up in a race we never consciously agreed to participate in.

The tools offered to us as educators in this 21st century create numerous opportunities for us to bring equity of the old and new ways into our classrooms.

What can Erasmus look like in our classrooms?

How can students experience culture outside of their own without booking a flight to another country?

What can vehicles of travel look like in our classrooms that are realistic, meaningful, and memorable?

How can we create a culture in our classrooms that truly moves towards capturing a global literacy?

Here is a starter kit for bringing Erasmus' vision into our classrooms:

- Compare and analyze news headlines from different countries about similar world events; discuss why there might be differences in the values and beliefs behind the headlines.
- Create Google maps of travel that are encountered in literacy and historical texts; numerous excellent examples can be found at www.googlelittrips.org.
- Label areas of your classroom with noted geographical sites or world capitals: The United Na-

tions Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization website has an extensive list of World Heritage Sites: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>

- Create a social network group with a partner school. Incorporate questions about culture, literature and learning in the conversations with the partnering students. A list of potential partner schools can be found here: <http://erasmusmundus.teamwork.fr/>
- Initiate a pen pal program with another school: <http://www.epals.com/>
- Support students in starting a KIVA Club that creates opportunities for the lending of raised funds as microloans to entrepreneurs in the developing nations: <http://www.kiva.org/>
- Create your own international days by inviting guest lecturers from local colleges and universities.

Regardless of the dynamic of our classes or readiness-levels of our students, the most important aspect is that we bring the world to our classrooms. Let's use literacy as our passport to travel the digital landscape and bring non-native ideas, poems, stories, and themes into our teaching and learning.

Invite Erasmus to teach a few lessons.

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“The main hope of a nation lies in the proper education of its youth.”

Desiderius Erasmus