Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 39 | Issue 1 Article 20

8-2025

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Recommended Citation
Lobert, Geryl (2025) "Educator Spotlight," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2543

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EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT

Geryl Lobert, Ray H. Lawson Award Recipient



Tell us more about yourself. Where did you grow up? What were some of your hobbies as an adolescent?
I have lived my entire life in Mecosta County, Michigan. I spent a good deal of my formative years in a small community south of Big Rapids on the Muskegon River, riding bikes, learning to water ski, boating, and fishing. I loved every season of Spring, Summer, Winter, and Fall watching the river change, respecting the force of the water, and loving the flora and fauna the river brought to our doorstep. Like most kids I tried different hobbies; piano lessons, sewing in 4H, clarinet in band; but I always came back to reading, exploring, and being in nature.

In what ways do you advance your joy? Share personal or professional examples.
First, I would have to say that my grandchildren bring me the most joy these days. I currently have seven, ranging from 22 years old to 5 months old and each of them brings me so much happiness. I have the privilege of being able to witness so many stages with each of them; I get the baby snuggles of my 5- & 12-month-olds, the silliness of my 4- & 6-year-olds, and I get to cheer for my 12- & 17-year-olds playing ball, and my 22-year-old starting college. I am so proud of them all.

Next, I have a genuine love for learning. I try to look at everything I do through a lens of discovery and growth, but also with the potential to bring those new learnings into my classroom. I have had a multitude of experiences throughout my life from gardening, creating multiple tiered wedding cakes, stained glass window pieces, kayaking, fishing, and each experience has brought me joy. In addition, I am always looking for experiences that will hone my craft of teaching reading and writing and as soon as I finish one book about writing or teaching, I am on to the next.

Last summer I was a resident at the amazing Golden Apple Art Residency in Harrington, Maine, where I worked on my novel and a collection of poetry. Lately, writing has done the most to advance my joy, aside from my grandchildren of course.

What are your favorite texts (i.e., books, stories, podcasts, magazines, recipes, etc.)? What have they taught you?
I could no more choose a favorite text than a favorite child. The list of ideas given is very interesting; I was reminded that when I was younger, I read all kinds of cookbooks. I would study the ingredients, what flavors worked together, what sides paired with a main course and decadent desserts. It gave me a connection to my grandmother who was a great cook. There were always magazines around my house, National Geographic, Reader's Digest, and Time; I poured over those for hours. My allowance would go to Teen Beat, Tiger Beat, and Seventeen, where I obtained many of my teen idol wall posters. We always had the newspaper delivered to our house and the Sunday edition was always my favorite, because of the colorful comic section. We had books, but my family utilized our local library, so only our very favorites were purchased or given as gifts and kept on the shelf. I read the entire Little House on the Prairie Series, Nancy Drew & Hardy Boys and read Harriet the Spy by Louise Fizthugh more times than I can count. When I got a little older, I got into historical fiction – Sacagewea and Lewis and Clark fascinated me when I was a teen. I now have favorite authors; Barabara Kingslover, Maya Angelou, Sue Monk Kidd, Kristen Hannah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

Jacqueline Woodson, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Angeline Bouley, Kristine Brickey, Sharon Draper, Katherine Applegate, Laurie Halse Anderson, Sandra Cisneros, Khaled Hosseini, Anthony Doerr, David Sedaris, and so many more; I believe that every book I've read has become a part of me and that every book has come to me a just the right time that I needed to read it.

I do have some professional texts that stand out as instrumental in shaping my teaching practices and sit on a shelf within reach, authors, Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher first shaped my ideas about how to approach reading and writing in the secondary classroom. I finally felt I wasn't having to adapt elementary processes to fit with my secondary teaching. Donalynn Miller, Bob Probst & Kylene Beers, (I'm so sad she's passed, and may she rest in peace) opened my eyes to how kids read and reminded me that reading should not be approached as a task, but as a joy and gift. Most recently Cultivating Genius & Unearthing Joy by Gholdy Muhammad have brought joy back into how I see my students and their unique attributes they bring into the classroom. A colleague of mine introduced me to Grading for Equity by Joe Feldman, and although I do not agree with everything he prescribes for grading; it has helped me to strengthen the way I approach grading writing assignments which in turn I believe provides my students with more feedback and a more accurate measure of their abilities towards mastery. And lastly, I have embraced The Doodle Revolution by Sunni Brown. This book not only has brought a little more fun into writing journals in my classroom; but for my own personal daily journaling as well.

For all of my life, from childhood to adulthood, I have been immersed in reading. I am privileged to have such depth and breadth of reading experience and to have been supported by my parents throughout. The importance of reading is something that I continue to share with my students all the time.

Podcasts are a new interest of mine; The 1619 Project, and Nice White Parents were the first I listened to which broadened my horizons, and I thoroughly enjoyed. I have also enjoyed the Diary of a CEO, IMO with Michelle Obama, Office Ladies, Hot Mess Teacher Express, Educators Who Dare to Lead, Unlocking Us with Brené Brown, Sold a Story, and Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me; I'm truly just getting started with this genre.

Do you recall the moment or time when you knew you desired to pursue a career in teaching and education?
I was working for a dental office and during my yearly review my boss told me that I was at the top of his pay scale and that in order to get a raise I would have to go back to school and get a degree. He thought I would go back to become an assistant or hygienist; I said that if I were going back to school I would go for what I wanted and I got my degree in English Education. It surprised him but he became my biggest supporter. I was 28 years old, terrified and exhilarated; it was a turning point in my life and the best decision I ever made.

How would your students describe you? What would they say are your pet peeves?
This is a funny question to me, because as I look back on 24 years of teaching, I believe each class would say something different. However, I have been told many times by my students that when they first come into my class they are scared of me and are worried about taking my class. I suspect it is because I have high expectations and a no-nonsense approach to my classroom management, but once they get to know me, they say how laid back and fun my class is, and they love that they are given choice in just about everything they read or write. I also have had many students tell me that for the first time they feel like they really understand what they are learning and that I teach them "way more" history than they ever got in History class. I cover a lot of background material to set them up for success in reading our required novels.

Pet peeves: I believe my students would say that being interrupted during class (i.e., phone, announcements, drills); however, I love when my colleagues pop in to share something or banter with me. Students would also say that I get annoyed when a student asks a question to explain something about the thing I just explained because they were not paying attention; my face does not hide it well.

What does it mean to be the recipient of the Ray H. Lawson award from the Michigan Council of Teachers of English? What advice do you have for future educators in pursuit of becoming classroom teachers?
To receive the Ray H. Lawson award from MCTE was a meaningful experience for me and just the knowledge I was following in the footsteps of other great award recipients was hum-

bling and inspiring for me to continue. Inspiring to continue to improve my skills and knowledge and be the best I can be for my students, inspiring to strive to encourage them to find their own excellence, and to always advocate for their right to read whatever they choose.

My advice for future classroom teachers is that they be open to and surround themselves with supportive people, not only those they work with, but those from other districts/schools as well. I am so fortunate to have a solid support system within the school I teach, but also the people I am connected with from districts all across the state of Michigan. I met my dear mentor, colleagues, and close friends through MCTE. I can call on them anytime during the school year and throughout summer for support - and I would do the same for them. Collaborate and do not be afraid to ask for help, that's not weakness, it's strength!

Embrace lifelong learning and be open to new ideas, the changes in education that have happened over my career have been staggering. Have structure, routine, and a plan!

As for students, don't lower your expectations, build relationships, be approachable and supportive to help them meet your expectations, but don't lower them, they will rise every time.