Opening the Conversation


In this issue we feature the third of four guest editorials in honor of NCTE’s 100th anniversary. We welcome Allen Berger, who was editor from 1979 to 1986, and Gordon Pradl, who was coeditor—along with Mary K. Healey—from 1986 to 1993. As with the January and April editorials, we asked our former editors to respond to a question from one of their own editorials: What is English? How do student achievement and teacher competency affect the public’s perception of what it means to be an English teacher?

Gordon

From the beginning of our editorial work, Mary K. and I viewed democracy and the teaching/learning of English as the central convening theme for the journal. This progressive mission encouraged us to stay focused on the profession’s endless conundrum: “What is English?” Our own loyalties sided with the paradigm that emerged from what we still view as the seminal event for English educators: the 1966 Dartmouth Conference. This generative conversation among teachers and scholars from the United States and Great Britain led to the championing of individual student development amid the riches of community connections. Such an approach, which focused on personal growth (Dixon, 1967), was not without its detractors. Those advocating a skills perspective on our subject were deeply concerned that students were declining in “correct” performance while becoming lost in solipsistic subjectivity. Similarly, those who were invested in the canonization of the artifacts of English literature were dismayed at the veneration of children’s writing and the eclectic invitation to include works of authors representing...
all of the people, not just the elite. The false binaries that proliferated—product versus process, form versus function, response versus meaning, accountability versus creativity—also served to make our original question contentious. Still, English 25 years ago allowed for nuance and provided a fertile territory to map, especially as new voices entered the discussion. Already on the horizon, however, was the specter of high-stakes testing and the fear that progressive, personal growth models of learning would not lend themselves to such standardized measurement.

Our continuing commitment to a lively conversation among the many voices within our profession meant we were always searching for articles that would be welcome reading beyond any narrow band of English teacher educators. It may be a bit pretentious to imagine English Education as a kind of reflective conscience of NCTE, but where else, we wondered, might one cut across all the boundary markers that had come to characterize the many families living under the same big tent? And so from 1986 to 1993, we were pleased to see vital texts filling our pages from the minds of a wide range of authors whose thinking still resonates today. We were interested in putting forward articles that contributed to supporting that community vision, especially how lived experience of the classroom and the preparation of English teachers contributed to such progressive theory, where democratic discourse was the governing tongue.¹

To encourage learning the tools of democratic discourse, we were always pondering what teaching strategies, learning strategies, and curriculum we might advocate. Unfortunately, the directions in which English teachers move—their range of convenience—is too often determined by how the domains of our discipline are defined by an increasingly panicky public. The richness of the language arts spreads out before us, but what are we able to embrace? How, for instance, do we get people to include listening as a key building block? How does active listening allow a speaker/writer to match inner intentions with outer recognitions? What must a person be quiet to, push aside, especially as the press of technological media keeps crowding out any time for reflection and contemplation?

Additional important foci come to the forefront, including teaching students to think critically by holding tolerant conversations around texts. Slippery though the term may be, critical thinking might be usefully defined as a conscious examination of the inevitable discrepancies between reality and the range of linguistic representations that are used to both capture and define that reality. For inevitably someone’s “capture” and “definition” serves their power, domination, and hegemony, and this works to the exclusion of others. How do English teachers convene zones of tolerant conversation about

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texts (those that students both write and read) so that interpretation is based on textual markers that can be pointed to, not blind faith and ideological conviction? How do we raise the consciousness of students to recognize the importance of working in such zones, even as we model the back-and-forth explorations that invite to the table all participants? In short, how do we help grow students who are confident in their language choices even as they use language to critically interrogate the constructed social environments with which they must contend?

The authentic practice of critical thinking entails endless struggle over group membership and competition, for whose interests are to prevail? We cannot escape identity matters in English as students converse with and interrogate the texts of their lives. That’s the beauty of the game in the English classroom. In terms of what we allow in and what is forbidden, how are texts given instant notoriety? Now a standardized test is never going to encapsulate the heart of what has sparked students’ imaginations over the years in lively, engaged English classes, where skills were indeed being developed and honed, but not at the expense of disturbance, uncertainty, or value questioning. The challenge is how to get on with the productive work while simultaneously raising a student’s deliberate consciousness about what kind of positive experience has been happening in the English classroom and why.

So here is a bedeviling paradox that I think demands our close scrutiny: How can citizens who have experienced enabling and ennobling lessons in English not be fierce champions for stimulating and imaginative English curricula? Why do citizens support mindless tests that extol mechanical skills and ignore the controversies of meaning-making and identity-forging? Given the range of contradictions, just what frames English in the public’s eclectic and increasingly conservative mind? Do we want the following as an epitaph for English?: The operation of literacy development was a success, but alas the imaginative capacities of the students were terminated forever. Even to voice such a catastrophic trend is to see the necessity of asserting English as an ongoing political process of consciousness-raising. It is paramount that we resist any idea of English being merely some neutral vehicle of expression.

Every citizen has spent class time with a number of English teachers, and so, depending on the individual teacher and the constraints of the curriculum, current attitudes and understandings for the future are being formed on a daily basis. But where is the lynch pin? Where are students also learning, overtly, the implications for the particular versions of English to which they are being exposed? I am troubled that students can be involved in excellent practices and processes, can even excel and be content, but then end up with theories of what happened to them 180 degrees at odds with
the educational intentions of the teacher. This is the unwinding thread that
haunts me and that needs investigation and action.

The trouble with English is it’s troublesome. Writing and reading are
always disturbing, disrupting, in some way. Ours is a moral/ethical discipline.
To the extent that we rise above mere literacy instruction, beyond simply
coding and decoding, we find ourselves actually tangling with texts. We are
forced to make choices, take sides. In the process of meaning-making existen-
tial realities must be confronted. For unless we avoid it—or the curriculum
makes us avoid it as is happening currently in Arizona where the attorney
general has banned “ethnic studies” classes (Horne, 2011)—the social world
must be owned, both the way it is and the way we would like it to be. As Freire
(1993) conclusively demonstrated, if people are going to learn deeply the
power of literacy, it must somehow be connected to the depths of their lives.

Allen

On my desk is a sculpture with some pencils and a saying attributed to Al-
bert Einstein: “It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative
expression and knowledge.” How reflective that is—and how out of touch
with what’s happening throughout the nation. With rare exception cascades
of mediocrity rumble down from mountainsides into every hill and valley.

In Patricia Polacco’s (1998) children’s book, Thank You, Mr. Falker,
a young girl’s grandfather drops a small amount of honey on the cover of
a book so that she would associate learning with sweetness. Now, in many
school settings, sweetness is gone and so is fun and laughter. Instead, it’s as if
the quote from Einstein were rewritten: It is the supreme art of the teacher
to awaken joy in taking state- and federally mandated tests.

A few weeks ago my sister and I were having a conversation about
education. She was complaining about so much testing and said, “Of course,
you’re probably in favor of all the testing in schools.” I was startled and asked
how she could think that, and her reply was that since I’m in education I
must be in favor of all the testing. Is her view representative of the public’s
perception?

We are not getting our view across to politicians or the public—even
with all the resolutions opposing mandated single-score standardized tests
passed by NCTE and other professional organizations. We need to give the
public a better understanding of what it means to be an English teacher.
Teachers and future teachers need to be reminded of the value of reaching
out to different constituents. Inviting policymakers into our classrooms.
Writing op-ed pieces for the public. Invigorating libraries. Striving for closer
Professional relationships between “English” and “education” on campuses. Encouraging students to participate in local or state chapters of NCTE.

I’m an optimist, but we need to be realistic. There are people in key places on the state and national scene who think they know a lot about English and education because they’ve gone to school for 12 years. These people believe the way to improve education is to diminish public support, shut schools, fund vouchers and charters, ban books, vilify teachers, violate contracts, test more, and teach less. One out of five children now lives in poverty in the United States. Some have no books or computers in their homes. Some don’t even have homes. These children can be taught, but teachers need time and resources to reach them. The public needs to understand that children have a hard time learning in schools where the roof is leaking and teachers spend their own limited money to buy toilet paper, not to mention other necessities such as pencils and books for the children.

Our Thoughts

Both Gordon and Allen speak to the questions, “What is English?” and what are the responsibilities of English educators and English teachers to interact with policies and practices in our current climate of assessment and accountability? In this issue, we offer three different articles that address these questions. English, and along with it English education, is changing and evolving. English educators must keep up with, and even look ahead to, the changes that affect our work with preservice and inservice English teachers. In this editorial Allen suggests that teachers and teacher educators are increasingly responsible for representing our field to the world. Yet what happens when someone goes from being an “English teacher” to an English teacher who presents at conferences or writes articles? Brian White, in “The Vulnerable Population of Teacher-Researchers; Or, ‘Why I Can’t Name My Coauthors,’” speaks to the need to understand the potential impact of teacher research and teacher publishing on the collegial relationships of teachers within their departments and schools. In their article, “Service Learning and the Preparation of English Teachers,” Heidi L. Hallman and Melanie N. Burdick present findings from a group of preservice English teachers who engaged in service learning as part of their methods course. Their findings begin to pave one path through which English educators might affect the world around them while introducing novice English teachers to the needs of students and communities.

Finally, Kristien Zenkov, James Harmon, Athene Bell, Marriam Ewaida, and Megan R. Lynch show how English instruction has—and we would argue
needs—to move outside of the classroom and into students’ communities and homes. Their Extending the Conversation article, “Seeing Our City, Students, and School: Using Photography to Engage Diverse Youth with Our English Classes,” shows not only how students can be engaged with their communities but also how teachers can band together to learn about their practice and about the worlds outside their schools through a photography and literacy project called “Through Students’ Eyes.”

Our conversations with Gordon and with Allen and our articles in this issue remind us both of the observation attributed to Tenzin Gyatso, The Fourteenth Dalai Lama: “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act.” And, as Allen added, these are our children; they are our future and the future of our nation. If we as English educators don’t speak out and write and act on their behalf, who will?

Note

1. “EE is distinctive for the emphasis it puts on the basic purposes and assumptions of English teaching, rather than on specific methods or analyses of particular literary works. In recent issues, the editors have been successful in getting philosophy-and-perspective essays from several major scholars (Benjamin DeMott, Neil Postman, James Sledd). But EE has also been receptive to straight-from-the-trenches pieces by young teachers. Given the importance of English studies and EE’s modest price, it certainly belongs in all academic libraries and should also be available to secondary school English teachers” (Katz & Katz, 1992).

References


