

English Teacher Education as Literacy Teacher Education

John S. Mayher
Lehman College, CUNY
NYU Professor Emeritus

I want to dedicate this talk to my life-partner: Sue Ruskin-Mayher who not only gave me lots of great suggestions but also kept me on focus. She's the kind of extraordinary teacher-educator/collaborator I'm calling for here.

What is English Education anyway? My friend and colleague Gordon Pradl used to say that English Ed incorporates all human knowledge because where language goes, so goes our role in facilitating its learning and development.

But in 40 + years as an English Educator, I've found that the label isn't very communicative to civilians and is often not very clear to colleagues as well. My former department chair used to refer to us as English teacher education so he could remember who we were, as it isn't all that clear how we are to be distinguished from all other English teachers whether in secondary school or college, or teaching English to students for whom it is a first or a second language. Actually that confusion might be a good thing for my mission today which is to explore a new way of looking at who we are, what we do, and who we should be doing it with.

The reason this is so crucial is that the school world keeps changing and the demands on English language arts and literacy teachers—same people? different people?— are changing as well. So the ways they get prepared must change as well. And there is no time to waste: the pressures on teachers and schools to perform have never been greater, the bar of success has never been higher or more broadly applied, and yet the reality is that despite all of the punitive test-driven means of 'reform,' the results have simply not shown the improvement that all stakeholders seek and deserve. Whatever one thinks of the ways being attempted to change schools, the fact is that the problems are real and we must play a central role in helping to solve them.

Adding to my frustration is the reality that the schools our students are going to be working in are making it more and more difficult to teach the way I believe—and I think most of us believe—they should. And, perhaps even more deeply, to teach in the ways **they** believe they should. To have the kind of professional respect and autonomy which would allow **them** to determine what is best for **their** students. But that does **not** mean doing business as usual. We must learn to take control of ‘reform’ efforts which up to now have been largely led by outsiders who don’t respect our students, our colleagues in K-12 schools, or **us**, or indeed anyone who is an experienced educator. Some are well intentioned, some are not, but they all share a conviction that we are part of—maybe most of—the problem and therefore can’t be part of the solution.

So doing business as usual won’t be good enough. There’s an emergency to be responded to. We have already lost our monopoly on teacher certification, and the chorus of criticism about inadequately prepared teachers grows louder each year. Some of us may be doing better than others, but as a collective we haven’t deeply examined our place in the educational universe, and when we do we’ll see the need for substantial change. In this talk, therefore, I’ll try to sketch a picture of the status quo and its limits, and an alternative picture of what it could be like. Getting there will not be easy, but it must be done.

The Evolving Status Quo

The conventional, historical definition of English Education—the study of how English is taught and learned with applications to the preparation of classroom teachers—has traditionally applied mostly to secondary teacher education. And, despite extensive differences between what secondary teachers need to know and be able to do and what they might learn in college English departments, the study of literature has continued to be the central organizing discipline of college and secondary school English teaching. And students who want to become English teachers have overwhelmingly made that choice because of their love of literature. That’s changing some in the last decade as students committed to creative writing, to film and media studies, and even video games have found their way to English teacher education programs. And, of course, even college and university English departments are no longer focused exclusively on the great masterpieces of British and American literature so when one reads the

transcripts of “English majors” applying to teacher ed programs, it is not always clear what discipline has been studied.

As I was thinking about this talk I looked at how we present ourselves on the web: The NCTE proclaims itself to be a 100 year old “professional association of educators in English Studies, Literacy, and Language Arts.” CEE serves those concerned with the “preparation and support, and continuing education of teachers of English language arts and literacy”. . [which has been] “Shaping English teacher education since 1965.” Even though the exact scope of these new labels is far from clear, what must be noticed is the determined effort to be inclusive and therefore more than the traditional literature centered subject English.

If English educators are going to have continuing relevance and a continuing central place in the preparation of teachers of English Studies, Literacy, and Language Arts, we must reexamine our self-concept and be prepared to redefine who we serve and how we do it. I know some people have already moved along this road, but here I’m going to draw on my own experience and at least a preliminary reading of the very exciting conference program for this meeting. I think this means that we must find ways to reach out and work with colleagues who in many if not most teacher education schools belong to separate programs, and, in some cases, to separate departments.

The need for integration

The need for integration stems from the need to better serve the pupils our students will teach and to better prepare our students to do so. Learning to read and write, speak and listen in all areas of the curriculum [and life] cannot be neatly divided into disciplines. The Common Core standards provide the newest example of the need to recognize that the traditional subject and level distinctions must be reexamined since if they are approached as goals, they can be taught and learned in mutually supportive ways. These are not new ideas for many of us who have been involved in working on writing and learning across the curriculum for 30+ years, but they are not fully integrated into most of our teacher education curricula or the institutional structures that support and restrict them.

There are at least four more or less disparate teacher education fields that bear on the theory and practice of literacy education: secondary English

English Literacy Teacher Education

teacher education, early childhood and childhood English language arts teacher education, teaching teachers of English to speakers of other languages, and special teacher education. Additionally some people now work in literacy teacher education programs which combine in some ways acquisition and development and remediation of reading and writing with a clear skill focus. Traditionally secondary English education curricula have been literature centered and related more or less well to college English departments, but have been less well prepared to deal with students who didn't acquire the necessary literacy skills before they got to middle and high school. That consciousness has shifted some in the last twenty years, but my reading of university curricula and methods texts and even of this program suggests that this bias remains. And as long as it does, our graduates will not have been well enough prepared to deal with the real students they find in their classrooms.

And when we begin to look further at the needs of ELL students and of the wide range of children and adolescents with special needs who increasingly populate mainstream K-12 classrooms, the situation is even worse. By giving inadequate attention to these pupils in the preparation of teachers in programs for mainstream native elementary and secondary English language arts teachers, we fail to provide our students with the knowledge and skills they need to deal with ALL the pupils they will encounter. And in many school districts the extra help special needs students get comes from special education teachers assigned to team teach in mainstream classes. Neither side of the pedagogical divide is being adequately educated to work in such collaborative relationships and to understand either the ends or the means of such teaching.

The Common Core's defining of reading and writing standards for secondary history/social studies and science provides yet another challenge for collaboration. I've worked in a lot of schools on writing and reading and learning across the curriculum, but the teachers of these disciplines I've worked with have usually had no prior education on these issues and approaches. Indeed, like many secondary English teachers, they expected to be able to focus on their subject and not on working with the literacy skills of their pupils. They tend to seek ways to blame either prior teachers or the students themselves, but once they see how integrating literacy instruction with their content improves the learning of the content as the kids are improving as readers and writers.

I'm not a complete enthusiast for the Common Core and I recognize some of its shortcomings—creating pressure for more tests, for a level of achievement beyond what all students can achieve, and some potential returns to common sense teaching. But its stress on integration of all aspects of literacy within ELA and across the curriculum, its recognition that there could be many different paths to the standards it sets, and its emphasis on both literature and non-fictional texts are all-important signals to the profession. The proof of the pudding will be in the tests, of course, so I'm urging us to be involved in that process while retaining a position to offer a strong critique and suggestions for modification.

How to build integrated teacher education programs

The logic of this broad scale integration is easy to see, but the psychologic is much more difficult. As faculty members we have been educated as specialists in our little niches and more often than not we chose them. We like them. We feel comfortable and secure in them. And we understand clearly how to be successful in them: what the rewards are and how to get them. One of the striking things about the NCTE is that in its 100-year history it has become more and more internally differentiated. Look, for example, at the members of the executive committee, which keeps adding new representatives of new-subgroups. Over the years different constituencies have been created, and in at least two cases: reading and TESOL teachers broke off to found entirely separate organizations. And there are lots of other organizations in related fields: speech, educational theatre, speech pathology, communication studies, media studies, and on and on.

Each of these organizations and the sub-organizations of NCTE and related fields have **different cultures**. Even though they all partake of some aspect of language education, like the blind men and the elephant, they use different means to 'see' it, and therefore have different perspectives. This could lead to a generative relationship among them, but in practice it has not. **And this is what makes this hard!** Our local culture boundaries are defined by the fact that we've read different books, use different words, have different emphases, and although we can sometimes see commonalities at a very abstract level, in the world of practice we have a difficult time sharing, collaborating, and making room for other paradigms.

There is, of course, some virtue in specialization within academies and teacher organizations, but when it comes to preparing teachers to be successful in the complex worlds of schools, children, parents, teachers, and the imposing demands of the testing culture, learning in a niche makes it harder and harder to succeed. So if we are serious about building a teacher education culture which is responsive to the complex, interconnected and integrated demands of K-12 teaching, we have to find ways to open up our curricular boxes and reconceive them across all of the sub-specialties that touch on literacy education.

This will require lots of thinking, lots of conversations, and lots of effort which must be marked by mutual respect—not always easy to come by in the academy. For example: do elementary and secondary teachers mean the same thing by reading ability, for example, and about how one acquires and develops it? What are the skills one needs to read non-fictional texts? How similar? How different from fiction? Why do some kids miss the literacy bus the first time and what can be done to help them? And what special problems are presented by English language learners before and after they have acquired basic language and beginning literacy?

These questions can proliferate, of course, but the important point to be made here is that none of them can be effectively answered without developing bridges across the internal divides our specializations have created. And the bridges must be focused on preparing people to teach, not just to understand different theories of learning. We must dive into what Donald Schon called the ‘swamp of practice’ leaving behind the well-trodden paths of our ever narrowing fields. This can be threatening to the untenured, of course, especially as university teacher education programs are more and more evaluated by the research and publication record of their faculty—records which are hard to build in non-specialized disciplinary settings.

This is potentially an area where the NCTE, and, especially, the CEE could take some significant leadership. What if the next CEE conference and/or a strand at the fall conference was focused on how to start and sustain such conversations at our home universities? Even that won’t be easy since I remember clearly the failure of integration that marked the now defunct NCTE Spring Conferences: a shotgun wedding of the Elementary and Secondary Sections with the CEE in which collaboration was rare and hostility rampant. And now there is a middle school section! Closer to home,

during my tenure at NYU the pattern was one of more barrier building rather than integration so that the Foundations of Educational Linguistics course I taught in the '70s with students (and sometimes faculty) from TESOL, Reading, Speech Pathology, and Media Ecology as well as English Education now only serves English Education students.

Can we do better? My new English Education colleagues at Lehman College have been making plans to reach out to the literacy program and special education—located in departments down the hall—as well as TESOL whose director chairs our department. Elementary education must be included as well—a little farther down the hall. The common denominator here must be **LITERACY TEACHER EDUCATION for K-12 schools**. We must share our understandings of the demands being placed on teacher, and especially new teachers, and try to do a more adequate job of building integrated curricula which will speak for comprehensively to the full range of competencies they need.

And this provides another area where we must overcome traditional barriers: the relations between teacher educators and K-12 teachers. No one on either side of that divide really believes that students completing a teacher certification program are **done**—that is fully prepared to be a teacher. But the law and normal practice gives such beginners full responsibility for classrooms. While we are not responsible for the huge percentage of teachers who leave teaching in 1, 2, 3, or a few more years, unless we can find better ways to make our on-campus teacher education programs more connected to practice, and ways to work with the schools to help them support our graduates through the transition to teaching none of this will matter. And since those beginning teachers will have to meet all of the challenges of their classrooms: high stakes tests for all students, regular and special education students and maybe a team teaching partner, ELL and native English speakers, and students with a wide range of literacy skills, unless and until our curricula and field experiences help them learn to do so, they won't succeed.

The goal of broadening the constituencies of English education—and *English Education*—is not new. We tried it in the early nineties when I was chair of CEE, and the recent editorial by Leslie Rush and Lisa Scherff featuring a conversation with Cathy Fleischer looked at their efforts to broaden the dialogue in more recent years. But I hope my proposals here are for more deeply integrative change: getting more people in our conversation

English Literacy Teacher Education

is useful, of course, but dramatically changing the conversation so that it deeply engages the perspectives of our peers from other specialties and works to make them colleagues in developing new curricula which will better serve our students as they make the leap into the classroom.

Time is short, I think, because the pressure of the common core and the tests that will soon accompany it will mean that literacy education, not English education, will be the defining paradigm, and effective literacy education will have to serve all students. Preparing teachers to succeed in common core classrooms will require more than simply changing our name or adding a phrase or two to our definition. It will require I think a fundamental paradigm shift through which we build university programs which integrate levels, perspectives, and accommodation to all students' needs in active partnership with K-12 teachers and a wide range of higher education colleagues in arts and sciences as well as education.

The NCTE includes many but not all of these potential colleagues, so CEE must find ways to work with them within the larger organization. As the teacher education core of the NCTE we must start by making common cause with the other teacher educators in elementary education and in the Conference on English Leadership. And then reach out where we can locally and nationally to TESOL, special ed and other related constituencies including social studies and science. And together we must push back where appropriate against inordinate testing, a punitive attitude toward students and teachers alike. We need to assert and demonstrate our willingness to change and our capacity to do the jobs required. In 1960, frustrated by the failure of the Congress to include English in the teacher education funding of the National Defense Education Act, the NCTE appointed a committee chaired by Jim Squire who wrote *The National Interest and the Teaching of English*. It made the point and got the funding the next year.

The common core, the NAEP, NCLB and the state standards as well all recognize the centrality of literacy to the educational enterprise. What we must do is move into that center and claim the pedagogical high ground. Let's change our name, our stance, and our capacity to collaborate with those who are also trying to help the children we serve. The time is now.

Post-Conference Note

This is pretty much the speech I delivered on Friday, June 17th to open the CEE Conference at Fordham. I'm grateful the Marshall George and the planning committee for inviting me to do the keynote, and to the audience for such a warm response.

If I had the chance, I'd add an enthusiastic endorsement of the National Center for Literacy Education funded by a 3-year grant from the Ball Foundation with the NCTE as the lead organization. It should make a real difference in building a counterweight to the testers of the Common Core and will be an important step in the NCTE's growing presence in the political debates swirling around education.

The fortuitous combination of this speech and the announcement of the NCLE which followed it gave a real focus to the conversations and sessions of the conference which proved to be one of the most stimulating and potentially effective meetings I've attended in many years. 3 cheers to all involved, and to Fordham for being such gracious hosts.