"[T]here is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," sayeth Hamlet

OR

Literacy Education Advocacy Day in D.C.
by Anne M. Cognard, SLATE Region 5 Representative
April 2008  SLATE Update
National Council of Teachers of English

Although my specialty is 16th-century British Literature, I like to teach American Literature, especially by asking the question: Where did our American art and culture -- thus our values -- come from? After beginning that class with contemporary fiction writers and poets -- Caucasian, Native American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, European, Eastern European, Middle-Eastern -- my students and I then delve into Native American creation myths side-by-side with the Puritans. Yes, the Puritans. I’m fascinated by the mythos of a people; thus, we consider John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” as a creation myth. (Legend has it that this lawyer-turned-explorer, this Christian adventurer, gave his “city upon a hill” speech either before or during the passage to the New World; en route, then, all was potential in his mind.) The speech was his means of imagining the formation of a “brave new world that hath such people in it.”

Winthrop’s envisioned ideal, his “model” (and his “hill”) is the beginning of our American art, art through writing.

Perhaps it’s this mythos of a people presented through the ethos of Winthrop that stimulated Catherine Sedgwick in her early 19th-century novel, *Hope Leslie*, to applaud the patriarchy rather than condemn Puritanism as her more famous fellow countryman, Nathanial Hawthorne, did.

Naturally enough, one might ask an obvious question: What does all this have to do with Advocacy Day and meeting on behalf of NCTE and SLATE with my Nebraska legislators and their aides? Well... much.

Flying into National Airport is analogous to perpetuating Winthrop’s dreamscape. Washington, D.C., in all its pristine beauty, its traditional yet strangely contemporary architectural magnificence, is a Land of Oz. Washington, D.C., as an ethereal landscape was for me accentuated by the shimmer rising from the Potomac, its reflective light swirling in the river. Like Winthrop, I sensed, rather than knew, what was before me. D.C. is a place of the imagination and represents a movement into an American “self,” deep into and inside one’s own mythos of American values, culture, and art. In the best sense, Washington is a fairytale fashioned out of the fabric of Winthrop, and also out of those 18th-century autobiographers -- Benjamin Franklin, Olaudah Equiano, Thomas Jefferson -- for whom, indeed, the extended personal was and is the political.

America’s literary history stands on a central premise: that language counts; that logic through reason can and will prevail; that each person is both a stellar example of independent thought and yet also bound by responsibility for the common goal, that the “city upon a hill” is made up of the “body” politic to serve the individual good. This civic interconnectedness hearkens back to Winthrop, yet receives its full thrust from our 18th-century forbears who, on founding this Republic, sought to exemplify the whole (that is,
the requirements of a nation) by means of the individual (that is, each person’s personal, self-determination to achieve in all arenas for the national good).

Winthrop’s creation myth that compels both the individual and the community toward greatness begat 18th-century “Enlightenment,” and that, in turn, gives rise to my sense that I might, with right on my side, travel to D.C. -- that city unto itself -- and speak on behalf of the common good: our children.

So, here I am in 2008, flying into D.C., an “island” that holds out utopian possibilities while it creates its own walls (albeit beautiful ones) and, thus, its own separateness. Going to this other Hill proved both strange and invigorating: strange, because it’s a journey into the inner sanctum of this protected, self-sustaining, bureaucratic fortress; invigorating because the edifice of government is founded upon these 17th- and 18th-century principles of noble individualism married to communal interrelationships.

As a supplicant on behalf of education, I found myself listened to, asked questions of, interacted with. In my meetings with Nebraska legislators and their aides, we definitely recognized our common ground: a need to benefit young people. How best can we help students to learn? The underpinning of that question was and is the idea of America’s future. The next generation determines if and how American values -- in its writings, its art -- may be perpetuated. Thus, educators such as myself appear to legislators as a powerful force. Because we are not professional lobbyists but mere amateurs who seem to be, at times, problematic provocateurs (perhaps even other-worldly), we’re rather respected. Simultaneously, we’re also perceived as people not quite aware of the complexity and dense impossibilities legislators face in moving any legislation anywhere on the Hill. Educators, it seems to me, appear to legislators as highly respectable (reminiscent of each legislator’s own fond remembrances of old Mrs. Childknow, that elementary teacher whose hug meant the world), and yet also highly improbable. To them we also seem to be one-tracked: “Give us more money, respect, recognition, decision making; listen to us because we, not you, know students and hold the key to America’s potential.”

It is important, then, to establish common ground, since our joint creation-myth idealism, our traditional purpose (to help youth assume America’s future) is only one of two prongs that prod socio-politico reality and our education needs. The other is our contemporary unease that we come from separate spheres and, consequently, have trouble working through the very discourse we believe to be a pillar of America’s literature, and thus its culture.

So, as an outgrowth of NCLB, it seemed to me necessary to determine what we --educators and legislators -- could agree on. How does this shard called education re-attach to the monolith that is D.C. politics? What good has come from NCLB (which one of my students calls All Children Dragged Forward), on which we build something comprehensive for the immediate future, that is, our NCTE Legislative Platform as ESEA moves toward renewal?

I found myself discussing with legislators two mutual goals: accountability and assessment. I addressed changes in accountability by suggesting a telling shift in emphasis for American education as a result of NCLB. I’ve come to think about the accountability shift in this way.

The questions asked me as an educator have been: What do you teach well? How do you teach it well? My answers have been curriculum and pedagogy. But today, such answers no longer serve as the rudder for accountability. Because of NCLB, the discourse has changed.
Questions we now ask are: How do students learn? How do educators know they’re learning what we want them to and at the level we have in mind? Accountability has triggered in education a seismic shift in how we practice our profession. It’s a good move. Post-NCLB “accountability” -- we could all agree -- is a good thing, provided we don’t assume an either/or fallacy. To avoid such a fallacy of logic, my second topic of mutual agreement in a post-NCLB educational context centers on assessment.

Legislators and their aides actually felt compelled by an argument that I am impassioned about: teachers must be the very core of any assessment decisions. We spoke about the Nebraska STARS process. We discussed at length that the only means to assure educational viability in the future are teacher-generated multiple assessments.

What does it mean to value the professionalism of teachers, whether as part of STARS, or at any and all levels of student assessment? Accountability is the sister of assessment and can only effectively occur when teacher-generated multiple assessments are created through ongoing, teacher-led staff development, what I call “objective subjectivication.”

Objective subjectivication: in this model, as I explained to legislators, means each teacher comes to realize that his or her predilections for individual, in-class teaching and learning are valid. Professional “subjectivication” has a place in education as teachers realize and respond to the diversity of each student learner; in such a context, to be “subjective” is to be professionally astute in differentiating materials and instruction.

At the same time, each teacher-professional in collaborative discussion, by means of a dialectic struggle over time, comes to agree with peers on how to help students succeed beyond the individual classroom in achieving high-stake national goals.

The undisputed, even sacrosanct, principle the legislators and I were able to agree on is that teachers must be centrally involved in establishing these multiple measures of assessment. Future federal legislation must give credence to teachers’ agreed-upon “objectivity.” That is, after all, what “standards” education means and is the platform on which the profession can build excellence in education and global competitiveness.

It seems to me that the Winthrop, Franklin, Equiano, and Jefferson model captures this dynamic between the individual and the collective good; autobiography for the 18th century is not the life of a “great man,” but the emblem of a “great nation.”

From our joint acceptance of basic principles, the legislators and I moved to the implications of these principles, and, then, to the inevitable logical conclusions from such implications. Several times legislators or aides said how important it was to them that I did not merely shout vitriolics against NCLB, that the NCTE Platform is built on the logic of the past (not merely an emotional outburst) -- a “model for educational charity.”

On the whole, then, my discussions with legislators were helpful to both parties. Each person with whom I spoke seemed to warm to our exchange. These legislators, often from a privileged, protected, sometimes self-perpetuating “Hill,” responded favorably when an “individual” invoked the “communal” to emphasize once more America’s grand experiment, acknowledged in the phrase E Pluribus Unum.
As we concluded, I invited legislators to consider why we—why they—must re-envision via NCTE’s Legislative Platform, early 21st-century education through the lens of federal funding. What does the future hold, and how is it dependent on what the federal government will do in educational reauthorization?

Four years ago the U.S. State Department sent me to the Republic of Georgia as a Teacher-Diplomat. That same year the Fulbright Fellows Program sent me to Japan for a cross-cultural educational exchange. I shared with my Nebraska legislators what I learned.

In both Georgia and Japan, their respective Ministers of Education are moving toward what they perceive to be a noble system in education: America’s! They want to abolish the one-national-test prerequisite for students tracked into each country’s national universities. Each country sees its high-stake, one-size-fits-all test as elitist, continuing an intellectual pogrom for the have-nots. So what do these two countries want instead? Civics education. “Testing” that we’d call “formative.” A way of opening up higher education to all able students and not only those with money and means to do well on the national test. In a word, they want America’s approach -- education for the masses and for the purpose of the common good.

The irony is that as America establishes national, high-stakes testing, great swaths of Europe, the republics of the former USSR, and Japan are funding new testing parameters: multiple-assessment measures formed by teachers. This fact stopped most Nebraska legislators and aides in their tracks.

And so, I’ve come full circle. Each student is the ligament (to use Winthrop’s metaphor) for the body politic (to use Franklin’s concept of extending the personal into a unified whole for the country’s good).

I left the physical Hill in D.C. as I gave thanks to Winthrop’s creation myth, his “hill.” And as I literally walked away from that D.C. space, I experienced both a sloughing off of this insulated politico-sphere and a re-engagement with my life as educator. Each NCTE member goes back to the classroom and, regardless of national, state, local, and even building “isms,” must face thirty individual faces per class in an attempt to form their and our future -- one student at a time. We recognize that each student in each class each day causes us consternation. We strive to make our discipline matter because we affirm the conviction that ideas count. They are not just abstractions, but are the reason why I can go to D.C., be heard, and even perhaps in a small way impact how education might unfold in federal legislation, affecting the next generation of our country.

That 17th- and 18th-century pillar built on discourse -- on language, texts, and reasoning -- still stands. Though the legislators and I inhabit different spheres, there is good in talking to one another. Even though we may be in the sometimes surreal surroundings of Washington, D.C., as we attempt to find a way to negotiate different perspectives on education we enact those early values of American culture affirmed through its literature again and again and again. The individual and the commonweal are inextricably linked in our literary heritage and are translated into our contemporary lives.

As I flew out of Washington National, I began to “do” the most important thing I and all my NCTE colleagues do: I thought about Walt Whitman and whether my Monday plan to have students study Civil-War-era journalistic photographs of the dead at Gettysburg would actually help those first-hour American Literature students see through the lens of literature what America is, and what it must be.