



JEROME HARSTE

Portrait of a Volunteer

In this feature, Jerome Harste shares his motivations for volunteering with NCTE and the benefits that he has experienced through his service to the organization.

Jerry is a Distinguished Professor of Language Education at Indiana University where he holds the Martha Lea and Bill Armstrong Chair in Teacher Education. He is Past President of the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Reading Conference, the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, and the Whole Language Umbrella.

Jerry has also co-authored several professional books (*Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* [with Kathy Short and Carolyn Burke] and *Whole Language: Inquiring Voices* [with Dorothy Watson and Carolyn Burke] as well as two professional videotape series (*The Authoring Cycle*, *Visions of Literacy*). His volume, *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*, co-authored with Drs. Virginia Woodward and Carolyn Burke, won the David H. Russell Research Award for outstanding contributions to the teaching of English. While teachers know him for these works, many children know him for his children's books, of which *It Didn't Frighten Me!* is the best known and is currently available in big book form.

What motivated you to volunteer for NCTE service?

In order to move the profession in directions I thought important, it soon became apparent to me that more could be done by working with colleagues who thought like me. Since I had already discovered that NCTE was my intellectual home, I decided to devote time working with colleagues in that organization.

What has kept you interested in volunteering your time over the years?

I suppose what has kept me interested is the fact that NCTE has made progress on fronts I think important. Together we began a critical literacy task force, a journal that featured teacher study groups, another journal to reach out to educators generally, an intensive, long-term professional development project, and the list goes on.

What does your current role entail?

Currently I am serving on the national consulting team for The Reading Initiative. Each summer we bring teachers from districts that have bought into this program to my university for training on how to use the program as well as how to work with teachers in an effective manner. I am also a member of The Diversity Forum and on The Literacy Award Selection Committee.

What key roles have you played and what did you find most satisfying in carrying them out?

As a member and later chair of the Commission on Reading we were able to organize a conference that questioned the use of basal readers in the teaching of reading. At the time this conference was very instrumental in supporting the use of quality trade books and children's literature in elementary classrooms.

As a member of the Elementary Section Steering Committee we were able to start several new journals as well as create and deliver a series of teleconferences on the effective teaching of reading and writing. In its heyday we had up to 110 different groups of teachers that participated in these teleconferences and follow-up by doing research in their own classrooms.

As president of NCTE I was able to create a Legislative Task Force, a Critical Literacy Task Force, and a Diversity Task Force to explore how NCTE might most productively move into areas that were currently not being well addressed.

My very first involvement in NCTE was as a researcher presenting data my colleagues and I had collected from 3, 4, 5, and 6-year old children relative to what they knew about literacy prior to going to school. My presentations at the Spring Conference in Indianapolis and at the Impact Conference that same year led to our research being "discovered" by the federal government with the net result that we received substantial funding to continue to pursue this line of inquiry. The NCTE Foundation also funded a spin-off study and in 1987 Carolyn Burke, Virginia Woodward, and I received the David Russell Award for outstanding research contributions to the teaching of English from NCTE, an honor that essentially guaranteed tenure and promotion at my university.

What satisfactions do you derive from volunteering?

I like to see things being done for the betterment of teachers, children, and the teaching of the English language arts. NCTE provides a vehicle by which I can find and work with colleagues who have similar interests and motivations.

Why would you recommend volunteering to another NCTE member?

As a function of my participation in NCTE, whether that be as a program presenter, member of a task force, or as president of the organization, I have grown professionally and personally. I used to love service learning projects, for example, until I heard Keith Gilyard and Victor Villanueva talk about the racial stereotyping that often accompanies these programs. I had never thought about this side of service learning before. I saw nothing wrong with including "inner-city" in the title of my work until critical theorists like Carole Edelsky and Pat Shannon helped me see how I was using it as a marker to say, "Hey, listen to me, I work in a really tough setting," thereby stereotyping in my own way the very students I saw myself as helping.

How or has your affiliation with NCTE and (project/service) improved your professional development and career?

I suppose the simplest answer is that NCTE allowed me to play key leadership roles in the profession, thus giving me visibility I did not and would not have had before. Even more importantly, NCTE provided me with a forum through which I could run my ideas and get input from some of the smartest professors and teachers in the world. No matter how much I thought I knew about a topic, I have always grown as a function of the conversations I have had at NCTE.

Do you have a favorite NCTE publication?

My favorite publications are *Language Arts* and *School Talk*. *Language Arts* keeps me up to date professionally. *School Talk* allows me to put something in the hands of teachers that I know they will find helpful as it deals with problems and issues they face daily, like homework, grading, conferencing, and what reading skills are the most important to teach and why.

What is the one book, article, or professional development experience you would recommend to other educators?

My recommendation is that teachers think seriously about talking their school district into joining NCTE's Reading Initiative. What this program requires is the formation of a teacher study group. NCTE provides the materials study groups need in order to improve the teaching of the various components of the

English language arts curriculum. I can't even begin to tell you how many teachers have talked to me about how much they have grown as a function of their involvement in this program.

How has being part of an educational community like NCTE improved your abilities as a teacher and as a leader?

I once asked a colleague who had just retired from Indiana University how retirement was going. He said, "Fine, but the real shock is that once you retire you lose your audience." "That," he said, "is very hard on us old teachers." While he was talking about retirement and not about joining or not joining NCTE, I think his message holds. By not joining NCTE you have already, in my estimation, lost your audience. My advice is to try life with an audience. It can make all the difference.