
Extending the Conversation

The State of English Education: Considering Possibilities in Troubled Times

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Louann Reid, and Melanie Shoffner

For the “Extending the Conversation” section in this issue, we invited English educators from the United States and abroad to reflect on the state of English education in their countries. All five contributors have interacted through their participation in the NCTE Annual Convention, the CEE summer summits, the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) convention, and the NATE conference. We begin with initial thoughts by Shaun Hawthorne, the Deputy Principal at Western Springs College in Auckland, New Zealand; and Andy Goodwyn, a faculty member at the University of Reading in England. Then, Marshall George (Fordham University), Louann Reid (Colorado State University), and Melanie Shoffner (Purdue University) offer a “trialogue” in response. We hope these perspectives give readers insight into international contexts and advance dialogue in English education.

The “Wonders” of Teaching English and Preparing Teachers of English in the United States

Marshall George, Louann Reid, and Melanie Shoffner

Dr. Shoffner,

I just got back home from today’s teaching practicum. Laura and I team-taught today with [the teacher] out of the classroom for most of the duration, and we tried to incorporate some strategies we discussed in class on Tuesday. The students started out doing a prewriting activity which led to a class-wide discussion, but then we had them make political cartoons ala Smagorinsky, and then we had them engage in a fishbowl activity, which they absolutely loved and were hyper-responsive to. I felt like it was one of the best/most effective lessons I’ve been a part of in any of my practicums. It’s almost narcotic how good it feels to have a class go so positively. So, thanks for that. Just thought it might brighten your day to know that sometimes the pedagogical end really does do wonders in the actual classroom. Take care,
Kaveh

Brighten my day? That email *made* my day. What English teacher educator wouldn’t rejoice when a student makes a clear connection between learning in the college classroom and teaching in the secondary classroom? If teaching is a difficult act, teaching about teaching is more complex still; as Andy points out, the “interdisciplinary” nature of education means we often draw from multiple fields to address one concept connected to the teaching and learning of the English language arts. Some days, the puzzled frowns and blank faces convince me that my students see little relationship between what we are doing in class and what they will do in their future classrooms, so it’s a marvelous moment when the click of understanding is clearly audible. Yes, Virginia, that pedagogical stuff really does do wonders.

Marshall

This anecdote brings a smile to my face. I am afraid that over the past 15 years that I've been at Fordham this level of explicit feedback does not come often enough from my student teachers. That has sort of changed for me this year as I am, for the first time, teaching my Developing Adolescent Literacy across Content Areas course on-site at a high school, where two faculty colleagues and I engage in instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) once a week as part of a pilot program for “clinically rich teacher preparation.” We think this is a good idea, but it is also part of our efforts to comply with our state’s Race to the Top mandate and with the recommendations of the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (NCATE, 2010). I do believe that this field-based model of instruction will lead to fewer “puzzled frowns and blank faces,” and we are certainly making the kind of connections with public schools that Andy mentions. But I also have concerns about the feasibility and sustainability of a model such as the one we are piloting.

Louann

I love that anecdote, too. When a class goes well, who doesn’t feel like a “real teacher,” as one of my students reminded me recently? And when that feeling happens during a teacher-preparation program, it reinforces the decision to teach and gives teacher candidates the confidence to persevere, believing that other wonders lie ahead of them.

Like Shaun, though, I also know the “tragic/sorrowful aches” of engaging learners for the long term. In my case, those learners are future teachers. Knowing that 50 percent of U.S. teachers leave the profession in the first five years (and Andy tells us that 40 percent in England do so), I wonder how to keep that sense of wonder alive. Although teacher preparation is not the only factor in teacher retention, it is one significant factor. Rostam’s comments underscore for me the value of a school-based teacher preparation program.

But I also share Marshall’s concerns about the feasibility and sustainability of a school-based model for teacher preparation. Keeping such a model viable requires continual readjustment and attention to relationships. At Colorado State University (CSU), we are nearing the end of our second decade of a school-based preparation program. In the early 1990s, when I started at CSU, we were building and refining our Professional Development School (PDS) relationships based on John Goodlad’s ideas about continuous renewal (Goodlad, 1994). School of Education leaders set up partnerships that included teachers in the local schools, faculty in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences, and faculty in the School of Education. (My ap-

pointment as an English education specialist is in the College of Liberal Arts, so I am involved in both units with my major responsibilities in the English department.) Faculty from all of these units teach undergraduates and graduates, supervise student teachers, and, importantly, provide placements in schools from the beginning of students' enrollment in the professional sequence leading to licensure. One-third of the credits are for student teaching; three credits involve experience teaching reading strategies to elementary and middle school students in their classrooms; and more than half of the remaining credits are for courses taught in first a middle school and then a high school. University faculty and public school faculty collaborate; the schools provide a space for the university class to meet; and classroom teachers provide space in their day two days a week for preservice teachers to work with students in small groups and to teach whole-class lessons.

Teacher preparation programs built on models like this demand a lot of everyone. While the English Department has always supported our work, it has thus far not been possible to build a schedule that includes student teacher supervision as part of our required course load. Instead, we focus on E-prefix content pedagogy classes and our collaborations with teachers in the schools are classified as service; because they are important we do everything we can to build and maintain relationships with teachers, but time is an important component of sustainability. And how much time can classroom teachers afford to spend working with preservice teachers semester after semester? Some tell us that they want a break every so often to focus on their curriculum and the students in their classes. Balancing the university program and practicum placements is tricky. Enrollment growth is one factor that strains feasibility. Do we further raise standards for entrance into the program beyond the ones that work well for us now in order to limit enrollment? If we limit enrollment too much, how do we maintain programs that are funded by student-credit hour production? How do we prepare teachers for the schools that need them? And how do we address the increasing state mandates when they are not well aligned with what preservice teachers experience in the schools because all of the changes are supposed to happen simultaneously?

Melanie

Shaun and Andy address so many of these same issues affecting their countries' English teacher education programs: continuous governmental mandates, increased administrative responsibilities, expanded understandings of English as a content area. Despite these changes and pressures, teacher

educators continue to respond in ways that maintain strong teacher education programs. Education being the conserving institution that it is, those changes may sometimes take longer than I would wish, but I see great benefit in our ability to adapt and revise how we view the teaching and learning of English.

At Purdue, for example, our English education faculty is currently rethinking how to better address teacher dispositions during methods courses in response to feedback from preservice teachers and cooperating teachers. Not all of our program revisions are internally driven. We are also revising a methods course to clarify our teaching of secondary reading in response to the state's Rules for Educator Preparation and Accountability (REPA). So much change in teacher education is often in response to external demands and state mandates, requiring teacher educators to be flexible and creative enough to manage these external pressures without sacrificing quality teacher preparation.

Like you, Marshall and Louann, I do wonder how much longer we can expect the local schools to support and sustain our programs. In the last year, we have seen some reticence from principals to accept student teachers in the local schools. With the increasing demands placed on English teachers, will our preservice teachers have access to classrooms in the coming years? If those classrooms emphasize standardized testing, rote learning, and predetermined curriculum, do we want our preservice teachers there, anyway?

With the increasing demands placed on English teachers, will our preservice teachers have access to classrooms in the coming years?

Marshall

At a recent conference of the New York Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, the issues Melanie raises were of primary concern. In this age of accountability, schools are becoming increasingly reticent to have unseasoned preservice teachers working in classrooms where the results of high-stakes testing will determine if those schools remain open and may even be linked to teacher assessment and merit pay initiatives. As certification requirements become increasingly demanding and involve videotaping of teacher candidates, schools in our area are even more hesitant to accept student teachers. If all goes according to plan, our schools of education will also be evaluated based on how the students of our teacher education graduates perform on state tests. The demands on teachers and teacher educators are becoming so intense, I fear that fewer and fewer of the best and the brightest are going to choose to enter a field that is under such serious attack.

Louann

This is happening in Colorado, too. It is more difficult to place student teachers in the semester that the state test is given. Teachers and administrators fear that the preservice teachers will be a detriment to the scores. Schools of education in Colorado also are likely to be evaluated in the way you describe, Marshall, responding to mandates similar to those in Indiana and New York.

Melanie

The march toward teacher deprofessionalization obviously isn't confined to the United States. In fact, Shaun and Andy describe situations, views, and attitudes that are eerily representative of our educational system: teacher-proof curricula, external oversight, increased standardization and assessment, waves of seemingly useless reforms devoid of teacher input. I can't help but wonder why, despite different educational systems in different parts of the world, we find ourselves in such similar circumstances.

Why do our countries care so much about education as to dictate its outcomes yet care so little about the act of education itself? Why have our countries adopted a uniform view that classroom teachers should be directed by, rather than engaged in, reform? Why—if education is important enough to drive such international attention—are teachers valued so little as intelligent professionals? This isn't the educational situation around the world, yet our three nations seem to share too many negative similarities.

Louann

The devaluing of teachers concerns me greatly, as does the concomitant devaluing of teacher education. While alternative routes to teaching have some benefits for some people and some students in some settings, many of these routes were devised to circumvent university-based teacher preparation. It seems “rarely sensible” (as Andy writes) to me to say that no teacher preparation—or little preparation, accompanied by on-the-job training—is preferable to good preparation. No one would claim such a thing for surgeons. Why is the work of teachers and teacher educators so little valued?

Marshall

I remember hearing Andy talk at NATE a few years ago about the draconian approach to evaluating teacher preparation programs in Great Britain that emerged 20 years ago. I remember thinking that it was similar to our NCATE

review process. Reading his piece here, I am slightly comforted by his statement that the British government later adopted a “more supportive and development stance” toward teacher education institutions. Nevertheless, the linking of the student test scores of our graduates back to the teacher preparation program where they were trained causes concern for Andy and his colleagues across the United Kingdom. As I mentioned above, we here in the United States share his concern. It’s not that we do not want to be held accountable for the teacher candidates that we graduate; however, the way the performance of those novice teachers is going to be judged is just not logical or meaningful.

Melanie

I have to agree. Next year, the state of Indiana is piloting district-determined merit pay throughout the state, with the goal of creating “locally developed, annual evaluations based on multiple measures including student performance” (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). Teachers’ salaries will now depend, in part, on their students’ performance on standardized tests and the teachers’ performance during formal observations. I use the term *performance* deliberately here, since I can’t help but wonder how authentic the measures and the outcomes will be in such a stressful environment. If even seasoned teachers would have a justified case of nerves, imagine the heart rate of a beginning teacher, still figuring out how best to work with the material and teach it to students while managing the classroom and interacting with colleagues.

Some people perform quite well under intense pressure, but anyone who has seen a reality show knows that most people don’t; for that matter, anyone who has sat in a classroom of test-taking students knows that pressure doesn’t always lead to the best outcome. An element of *schadenfreude* may drive our interest in an accomplished chef’s meltdown during a culinary competition, but what drives our interest in placing teachers (and students) in an environment defined by standardized test scores, annual yearly progress, and pay-for-performance? I’m rather skeptical that such measures “[ensure] our teachers are treated like the dedicated and talented professionals they are” (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.).

Let me be clear, though: I am not opposed to the evaluation of teachers (or students, for that matter). Like any professional, a teacher should be held to certain standards and able to demonstrate proficiency with those standards. But, to paraphrase Shaun, those in charge of education in the United States seem to have little trust in teachers’ ability to do their jobs

well and continue to develop hoops for teachers to jump through to prove they are doing what they should be doing.

Louann

I am not opposed to teacher evaluation, either. However, I am quite concerned about the dangers of reforms based on ill-informed or poorly designed evaluation. At this point, anyway, one example of this is the national survey of teacher preparation programs underway by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), led by Kate Walsh. This group plans to publish results of their survey of teacher preparation programs in 2012. Primary data sources are syllabi. No school visits. No multiple sources of evidence. Definitely no trust.

Marshall

I am pleased that a group of CEE members took on the NCTQ evaluation plan by writing an analysis of their evaluation plan. The document has served a number of CEE members who have shared it with their deans and university administration. The statement can be found at www.ncte.org/cee/positions/NCTQanalysis.

Melanie

With the constant devaluing of teachers as skilled professionals, I wonder how to prepare secondary English teachers in and for this current atmosphere. How do we, as teacher educators, respond when faced with the eager faces of our preservice teachers, knowing the multiple challenges they will face when they enter the classroom? How do we answer them when they ask, “How much autonomy will I have when I start teaching?” or “Would you be an English teacher if your salary was connected to your students’ test scores?” How can we, in good conscience, prepare our students as independent, creative, reflective teachers when those attributes seem so little valued in today’s schools?

Marshall

Melanie’s questions are good ones. During our presentation at IFTE, Louann Reid, Janet Alsup, and I briefly shared the “current state of affairs” in American English education and those in the audience from New Zealand, Australia, and Great Britain shared stories about their struggles to understand and deal with the “reform movements” occurring in their own countries. Similar issues emerged—overregulation of teachers and teacher education,

an overemphasis on standardized testing, and deprofessionalization of educators at all levels. And on Twitter every day, I read tweets from exasperated teachers and teacher educators echoing sentiments such as, “those who can, teach . . . those who can’t make policy about teaching.” I follow folks from all over the globe on Twitter and every day, it’s the same outcry—teachers are under attack, and that includes teacher educators. Shaun hits the nail on the head when he says that the government seems to “have little trust in teachers’ ability to do our jobs well.”

Melanie

One of the wonders of being an English teacher educator is working with students as they develop into teachers-to-be. Our students come to us as passionate, inquisitive, thoughtful young women and men (just as they do in England and New Zealand). They want to work with adolescents and literature and language, and they genuinely believe that, in doing so, their teaching of English can make a difference in some way. Increasingly, however, I find my students asking me, directly or indirectly, the same question: Should I do this? I freely admit that, some days, I wonder if they should. So many of them leave in the early years—again, just as they do in England and New Zealand—disenchanted with education as an institution and teaching as a profession. I hate to see them go but it’s difficult to question their decision.

Louann

Melanie, this comment highlights for me the tensions between wonder and worry that we’ve been discussing. Our university students are reaching for a life in which teaching English can make a difference, yet many become disenchanted. This situation reminds me of another part of Colquhoun’s (2009) “The Therapeutic Uses of Ache.” Physician and poet, he explored the meanings of ache in the moving essay that Shaun mentioned. At one point, he said something that I think pertains here: “Perhaps all ache at the end of the day is a reaching.” For our passionate students, as for ourselves, perhaps reaching has “therapeutic uses,” too. Is there value in the reaching, in the passion to make a difference, even when we know that preservice teachers will confront obstacles to being allowed to teach well? I believe there is, and I believe that the nation’s students need us to believe that.

Marshall

So why do you think that we continue to go to these international conferences? My dean looks askance every time I hit him up for support for one

of these events, and my colleagues are convinced that I am just doing it to get extra days off and take vacations to interesting new places during the school year.

Louann

Perhaps if I had never attended an international conference I would not be so convinced of their value. My first ones were those sponsored by NCTE in Utrecht and Heidelberg. While the majority of attendees were from the United States, the attendance was not solely American, and I learned the need to leave home only to return with a greater understanding of what I do and why I am an English educator. As a member of the planning committee for the IFTE conference in Melbourne, I worked closely with representatives from Australia, Canada, England, and New Zealand to create an experience that would involve interacting with educators who not only had much in common but who could also contribute to our education through the differences in our situations as well. At the IFTE conference in Auckland, keynote presenter Hilary Janks, for example, enriched my concept of critical literacy through her South African perspective. Debra Myhill's research on teaching grammar offered me changed ways of approaching the topic with students in our teacher-preparation program. Barbara Comber, Pam Grossman, and Carol Lee likewise provided perspectives and provocations that I would not have experienced by staying home. The overall effect for me of meeting people and attending international meetings has been to recognize that we are all always at the sort of crossroads that Andy describes but to know that we are not alone there. At home, I sometimes despair at the barrage of nonsense—or non-sense—in discussions of education reform. Abroad, I regain the wonder that brought me to English education in the first place, knowing that there are those like Shaun and Andy and so many more with whom I can work through the barrage of nonsense.

Melanie

My colleagues also wonder why I pack my suitcase every year and head across the ocean to attend the NATE conference in England. Their raised eyebrows seem to indicate that English teaching and English teacher preparation are rather nation-specific endeavors. One would think that—and, certainly, the United States has some definitive and different educational contexts, views, and goals when it comes to teaching and preparing to teach English (calling this complex field of study *English* comes to mind). One would be surprised,

however, at the connections and similarities across contexts and countries in English preparation and teaching.

Aside from my admitted interest in all things English (including the country), I go to NATE because I enjoy the opportunity to interact with my international colleagues, whether classroom colleagues or university educators, and examine these connections. I also enjoy the close-knit atmosphere of educators coming together in a smaller conference (especially through the casual conversations inspired by scrumptious tea breaks). Those same qualities led me to the 2011 IFTE conference in New Zealand. A larger suitcase, a different ocean, and I had the opportunity to extend my circle of colleagues and my understanding of English teaching on the other side of the world.

I've had many good moments at past NATE conferences, from the personal pleasure of interacting with colleagues in Warwick who have since become good friends to the teacher-ly excitement of expanding my views on language study at Samuel Johnson's House in London. Not surprisingly, I thoroughly enjoyed my experiences at the IFTE conference, especially the opportunity to talk to other educators. Whether discussing the similarities of teaching English with teachers from Auckland after my presentation or debating the differences in teacher education with teachers from Australia over dinner, the conversations at IFTE were interesting, insightful, and invigorating.

Perhaps the wonder isn't that I'm willing to pack my suitcase and fly across oceans to attend conferences but that my international conversations continue to extend and enhance my understanding and wonder of secondary English teaching in the United States. In the end, these conferences provide a chance for English teacher educators to learn from one another and—as Louann so succinctly said—work together to get through this barrage of nonsense.

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