

The 2013 NCTE Presidential Address: Standards, Students, and the Meaning of Life

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The following is the text of Sandy Hayes's presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, on November 24, 2013.

Last spring, in a burst of optimistic energy, I tackled my File Cabinet of Doom, sorting through forty years of artifacts characterizing our profession, from the ridiculous to the sublime. Amid the jumble of memorabilia, I found a copy of the *Minnesota Model Learner Outcomes—1988*, by my reckoning—the great-great-grandparent of our current state standards. It was an ambitious document. Among the almost eighty broad goals were these statements about things that each learner will be able to do:

- Be familiar with the ideas that have inspired and influenced mankind.
- Understand that efforts to develop a better self contribute to the development of a better society.
- Express self through artistic creation.
- Understand society's responsibility for dependent persons of all ages in a manner consistent with the growth and development needs of those persons.
- Practice stewardship of the land, natural resources, and environment.
- Act in accordance with a basic ethical framework incorporating the values which contribute to successful community life such as honesty, fairness, compassion, and integrity.

And my two favorites:

- Accept that there is more than one way of being human.
- Develop a foundation for meaning in life.

I was saddened that the ambitious heritage of goals like these has become a competition of narrow statistics in this current iteration of standards.

But as I turned to the drawers containing my archive of student memorabilia, my dragon's hoard of gems of creativity, insight, poignancy, and special relationships, I realized that it isn't the standards that are essential; it is the first principles underlying the standards that live in these treasured artifacts, that are celebrated in these memories we keep, that spark magical connections with our students. This is why we became, and remain, teachers.

Sandy: Vignette 1

It was my first teaching job. I had been hired on the last Friday of winter break and started work on Monday. I was the fourth teacher these 7th and 8th graders had had. I spent a frantic weekend planning how I could make it a fresh start for the students. I knew I had been successful when, at the end of the second week, Gerri, on her way out of class, handed me an envelope with this enclosed note written neatly on the belly-buttoned kewpie doll stationery popular at the time:

Mrs. Hayes,

You are my favorite teacher this year! You seem . . . well . . . human, not like some teachers! We do things in your room to help us understand why things are like they are!

Sincerely,

Gerri

Gerri meant it as a compliment; she would never know how often I look at this touchstone to remind myself to stay well . . . human.

Vignette: Lisa Martin, Clark County Schools, Nevada

Dear Ms. Martin,

You probably don't remember me but I sure remember you. You were my fifth grade teacher and as it turns out, the best teacher that I have ever had. You were always smiling and happy everyday. You made everyone feel special and I loved that I could talk to you about everything.

I will never forget how you made me feel so welcomed, especially since I moved to your class in the middle of the school year. My family moved around constantly and I never knew just what to expect once I entered into the next new class, in the next new school. The day I arrived in your class and saw your warm smile and friendly eyes, I felt safe. I never wanted to leave. You had a calm way of speaking to me that made me feel like everything was going to be okay.

It was in your class that I developed a love for books and writing. You read to us everyday and I couldn't believe how much writing we had to do. I never really thought of myself as a writer until you called me a writer. I even still have my writer's notebook. My mom kept it in a box with other things I used to bring home from school.

I have accumulated quite a few notebooks now. After your class I never stopped writing. I wrote about my friends, my family, my crazy life, everything. You always said that

if we had something to say and no one was around to listen, we should write it down! There were a lot of times like that for me.

When I moved into middle school, my teachers said I had a very artistic style and that the voice in my pieces clearly distinguished my writing from everyone else. I even won a few writing contests in middle school, I dedicated every prize to you.

When my mother got really sick, we stopped moving around so much. My mother was too weak to travel and at last we could stay in one place. I was secretly relieved because finally for the first time, I could stay somewhere long enough to really make friends and not be forever known as “the new girl.”

The bad thing about not moving though, was that that meant that my mom was not going to get any better. The reason we had moved around so much in the first place was so that we could find a remedy, or procedure that would extinguish the cancer in her body. After fifth grade, there just wasn’t anything else that could be done. So mom decided that we weren’t going to move anymore, but stay where it was warm and sunny.

I wrote so much in my writer’s notebook during that time. Judging by all the notebooks I have piled in boxes around my room I had a lot to say that I couldn’t say aloud.

I took pictures of the things that made my mother happy like palm trees, the snow on the mountains, the rabbits, and the colorful birds. I kept all these things in my notebook with all the poems I wrote for her. She loved it when I read some of the things I had written to her. She said my words comforted her.

I guess you are wondering why I have written you this letter after so many years. My mom died last year and we are moving again to be closer to my grandparents. I didn’t want to leave without letting you know how much you helped me be the person I am today. You gave me confidence and taught me how to be patient and strong. My dad is not taking it too well, neither is my younger sister so I have to be the strong one for everyone else. I can do that because I have my writing to escape to when life seems too difficult to bear.

You inspired me to have a voice and to express myself through my writing. I will never forget your wise words.

Thank you, Ms. Martin for being such a great teacher. I am so lucky to have been in your class. You made me feel like there was nothing I couldn’t do! I never knew then just how much of a difference knowing you and having you as a teacher would make to my life.

I will remember you always,
Grace . . . your former fifth grade student

Vignette: Kevin Hodgson, William E. Norris Elementary School, Southampton, Massachusetts

Not long ago, I had a sixth-grade student, a boy, who began the year refusing to write anything. Maybe you’ve had someone like him in your room, too. He wasn’t really rude about it. He was just resistant. He didn’t want to write. At most, he would quickly jot down a few sentences and that was about it. He didn’t see the value of his words. I learned from one of his parents that this had been the case for some time, although he was an avid reader.

Over the course of the fall, though, I watched this wonderfully creative boy slowly emerge from that shell.

It began mid-year, with our video game design unit. Here, finally, was something in school that he was interested in, and our work around using writing and design in the development of a game opened his eyes in ways that nothing had before.

Gaming was the hook, and soon, this student was personally pushing himself to craft the narrative of his video game and to write out detailed instructions for how to play the game. He began to understand the connections between the writing process and the design process that underpinned the structure of something he loved.

Not only that, he began to write, more than ever, and he found ways to connect his writing to something meaningful for himself and for his peers: the video game that he was designing that would be published and played by an authentic audience. He even later submitted his game to the National Video Game Challenge.

I admit, though, I was worried that once we moved past our video game design unit, he'd revert back into the one-sentence writer that had occupied the desk for the first few months of the year. Happily, that was not the case.

Almost as if the dam had finally broken open, he began writing—inside of school and then outside of school (unheard of, according to his mom). Not just any writing, either. He began to work on a novel that was inspired by his love of *The Hunger Games*, *The Lightning Thief*, and a host of adventure-style video games that he enjoyed playing so much. It was as if some light suddenly went off in his head and he was full-in.

He and I had long discussions about plot and characters, and how to pace a novel with scenes. He sent me drafts. I wrote him comments. He saw himself as a writer, finally. Video games often get a bad rap—sometimes, that is justified—and I suspect not every teacher in this room would see game design as analogous to writing, but you know, this was the hook that turned a reluctant writer into a budding novelist.

I call that an Epic Win for the Ages.

Sandy: Vignette 2

I had Jake's mother in a speech class as a junior. Her topic for the persuasive speech: Motorcyclists should not be required to wear helmets. She had Jake two years later, divorcing his father before Jake entered school. Jake had failed the first three quarters of my 8th-grade English class. Then we read *The Pigman*. I would never have guessed that this would be the ignition switch for Jake.

When I remarked that if he kept up this work, he could end the quarter with a B, he shot back, "What would you give me if I did?" I am mortified to admit that I blurted, "A hundred dollars." How could I have said that? Jake just laughed, but I worried that he had taken me seriously.

As he continued to keep up with his work, I cautiously probed his motives. It appeared he was honestly interested in the work, caught up in the Alex Rider

series, and had forgotten all about my blunder. He was so motivated that when we were working in the library during a school book fair and he noticed the next two Alex Rider books, he bemoaned that it was the last day of the fair and he didn't have any money. Jake wanting to buy books! I lent him the money. He paid me back the next day.

Jake had to leave school a week before year's end to go to Wisconsin to spend the summer with his father. He earned a B-. Before he left, I gave him more Alex Rider books and the remainder of the "bet" in Barnes and Noble gift cards. I saw him next during the week before school started. He was out for soccer, his first venture into sports, into a positive community of peers. He greeted me shyly and told me he had read the books, bought more books, and even bought a book for his dad's girlfriend. He also said he had written me a letter but had left it at home.

I wish I could say that this story had a happy ending. But to play sports, you have to have passing grades. He'd had one quarter of success in English. One summer of enjoying books he picked for himself, books that didn't pass muster in his high school class. Now he had teachers who hadn't had a chance to develop a relationship with him, and one teacher who couldn't maintain a relationship with a boy in the adjacent building, which might as well have been in Wisconsin. Jake didn't play soccer. He didn't finish high school. I wish, though, I had his letter.

Vignette: Carla Beard, Connersville, Indiana

Sometimes we teach to a common standard, and sometimes something extraordinary happens. I'd like to tell you the story of a lesson that started out to be one thing but turned into something much more.

I had a group of students who weren't good editors. They had trouble structuring a sentence; they didn't understand the power of a good paragraph—you know the kids I mean. How could I engage them in editing when the worksheets and the exercises were so deadly dull?

I had them write a book.

More accurately, we collaborated on an oral history, where they interviewed someone who was at least a generation older than they were, and we compiled the results.

Each semester the kids chose a different theme. The best one was "Mischievous," where they interviewed someone about some harmless—mostly legal—trouble they got into when they were high school students. Story after story came into school, and the kids laughed and laughed and said over and over, "I learned a whole different side to my folks."

Even the stories that weren't funny provided the kids with some insight. One semester the theme was "High School," and a girl interviewed her mother, who had gone to high school in a small town, and they went out for lunch every day. The mother had always ordered the same thing—a hot dog—and she told her high school buddies she just LOVED hot dogs, but she told her daughter years later it was all she could afford. And even though it was all those years

later, the mother would not allow us to publish the story. The daughter said in class it was very insightful for her.

The kids were all engaged in this project, but I knew I really had a hit when parents started mentioning how meaningful it was for them to participate and how glad they were that their students were having this experience. I knew I was really on to something. It was the power of narrative; it was the power of storytelling. Kids and the community were connecting in new and unexpected ways, and powerful things were happening. Oh—and their editing skills improved, as well.

Vignette: Lisa Scherff, Estero High School, Estero, Florida

As some in the audience may know, after ten years in teacher education, this past August I returned to the high school classroom to teach English and reading. In fact, I came back to the school where I began my teaching career in 1996. When people ask why, it is hard to articulate one particular reason I made this decision, but mainly it relates to the goal of acting on the belief that each individual has value as a human being and should be respected as a worthwhile person. Goals like this, which should be the foundation of every P–16 school, have been replaced by narrow standards, high-stakes tests, and value-added models that do the opposite. I had an entirely different talk prepared, but then on Wednesday before I left, I received this letter from a student. She gave me permission to read it to you this morning.

Gracie is a senior in my Intensive Reading class, a double block of reading for students who have not passed the FCAT, Florida's mandated 10th-grade graduation exam. Gracie has been through a lot in her seventeen years and some feared she might not graduate from high school. I feel for my reading students, like Gracie, who lose electives and opportunities to take other classes; they are tired, demoralized, and fearful of not passing. Many of these students have been in reading classes since middle school. Their entire worth seems to be tied to one test score. This past October was FCAT retakes, something very stressful for my reading students. After not passing for two years, Gracie passed. And she wrote me this note:

Dear Dr. Scherff

Gracias! For being the best reading teacher ever! Thank you for being patience with us. When i first entered your classroom I wondered what where you doing teaching in a high school??? Because I noticed your name had a "Dr." in front of it. These passed few months in your classroom has been a good experience. I've enjoyed reading ALL your books :). I got a 3 on the FCAT. Now for sure I'm on my way to graduating. Thanks to you!! God Bless and have a wonderful Thanksgiving :)

Gracie is more than a test score. And I will hang this letter in a place to remind me every day that fostering self-worth, confidence, critical thinking, and a love of learning is why I do what I do.

Vignette: Mike Roberts, Rowland Hall, Salt Lake City, Utah

I think it was probably somewhere around 11th grade when I began to realize that most of the stuff I had learned in school wasn't exactly transferable to my everyday life.

I mean, memorizing the Gettysburg Address? Really? Or how 'bout that periodic table? Yeah, I'm still kind of waiting for the day where knowing that AU is gold is gonna pay off! And let's not forget about the old Pythagorean theorem. OK, truth be told, I never really *did* learn that one, but I think you get the idea.

And my English classes were just as guilty. I mean, not once in my lifetime outside of school have I been asked to diagram a sentence, write a book report, or create an acrostic poem. And if you ask me, if you've done more than one diorama in your lifetime, you've probably done one too many.

Long story short, most of what I learned in school only seemed to benefit me while I was *in* school.

So when I became a teacher fifteen years ago, I knew that I wanted to make my 8th-grade classes different from those that I had taken. And while I understood that there were some specific requirements that *had* and *needed* to be taught, I was determined to make *how* I explored each topic something that would transfer back to the everyday lives of my students. And rather than having the concepts I dispensed be useful only for grades 9, 10, 11, and 12, I wanted my students to obtain skills and knowledge that would benefit them five, ten, fifteen, or even twenty years after leaving my class.

So what does this look like?

It's a discussion focusing on how the theme of loneliness in *Of Mice and Men* relates to some of today's most popular songs.

It's students honing their public speaking skills by doing oral presentations on anything they want. And by anything, I mean *anything*, including the unicycle, live chickens, and yes, even the Kardashians.

It's analyzing TV commercials and visiting the grocery store in connection with reading *Fahrenheit 451* as a way to better understand advertising techniques in today's society.

It's summarizing last night's reading into a 140-character tweet.

It's kids earning points for supporting their classmates by attending school-sponsored social events like sports and dances.

It's modeling how to make even the most mundane creative by watching a YouTube clip of the rapping flight attendant.

It's allowing students to write the traditional five-paragraph essay on their three most prized possessions.

It's sharing personal failures with my classes to show them that failing is part of life.

It's teaching dialogue by allowing students to create a rap battle between Macklemore and Shakespeare.

It's students learning how to communicate and listen by gathering five interesting facts about five randomly selected people within the school (including faculty and staff).

In a nutshell, it's presenting the content they *need* to learn in a way that makes them *want* to learn.

Look, the skills we have to teach our students aren't going away any time soon. In fact, in today's test-crazed world, I'd say they're more important now than ever before. But if we truly want our students to experience learning that extends beyond the walls of our classrooms, we need to find creative ways to connect it to their present and, perhaps even more importantly, future lives.

In closing, not only do I admit to using live chickens, YouTube, and the Kardashians in my classroom, but I do so very proudly. And while this might not be considered "textbook" teaching, it creates a learning atmosphere that is relevant, meaningful, and lasting for my students. This was my goal fifteen years ago, and it continues to be my goal today.

Sandy: Vignette 3

It was during the last days of our traditional *Diary of Anne Frank*/Holocaust unit when I received a phone call from Tina at 10:30 at night. I had known Tina's parents when they were seniors, though I had never taught them. I'd had Tina's two brothers. For all of them, school had been a struggle. But this phone call showed me a different side of Tina. Tina had seen a ten o'clock news story recognizing the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Dachau; this story featured a Minneapolis woman who had survived the camp. With surprising resourcefulness, Tina tracked down the woman's phone number and called her at 10:25 to ask if she ever visited schools. The woman replied, "Have your teacher call me in the morning." Tina didn't—couldn't—wait to tell me. I wouldn't have cared if she had called me at midnight. Because of Tina, this class experienced a deeply personal and never-to-be-forgotten understanding of the Holocaust through Gretta's visit to our class.

Vignette: Sarah Gross, High Technology High School, Lincroft, New Jersey

Teaching is rife with "trials by fire." We know that hands-on is one of the best ways to learn because that's how we learn! No class can prepare you for those moments, and we have all had those moments (you know, those moments, hours, days, even weeks) when we have to rely on our wits and intuition and not textbook knowledge or notes from a college class.

That same practicality is translated to our teaching, day in and day out. I have standards I need to help my students meet, and I have a curriculum to follow. Those standards tell me where my students need to end up, but in the wise words of my friend Paul Hankins, they don't tell me how I have to get them there. I have heart lessons that I know are vital to my students' growth as human beings, whether or not my state or federal government formally recognizes them in a document. I know that my students need to practice stewardship of the environment before it's too late. I need them to learn how to be good digital citizens. I want them to

contribute to the development of a better society. And my passion? I wish for them to be passionate and lifelong readers.

Nothing I just cited is listed in my state standards, the Common Core Standards, or any standards I've ever been given. But no matter! They are my standards, and I work toward them every day with my students.

That's why my students spent one day last week, one day in October, and one day in September sitting in the woods, observing nature. It's why they are reading Dr. David Haskell's Pulitzer Prize finalist, *The Forest Unseen*, as part of a joint project between English and biology. In the past three months they have created eco-art, studied a square meter of forest, and found a bone in the woods! A little bit of research showed it was part of a deer femur. You won't find anything like that in my textbook, but wow, have they learned a lot!

My students also spend a great deal of time on social media. Many of them follow me on Twitter, and we use hashtags in class. I consider it a compliment when they tell me my Twitter feed is boring because I "talk a lot about teaching." I'm modeling a positive digital footprint for them! During class we have participated in Twitter chats, the National Day on Writing hashtag, and dissecting the rhetoric of the presidential debates. As a result, many of them have cleaned up their digital footprints and become more conscious of what they post. That's important to me, and it will one day be important to them.

And I love when they use our class hashtag to book talk their favorite book or to get recommendations.

They might not join a book club on their own, but they are getting recommendations from friends, just like adult readers. Just last week a student tweeted, "I am actually reading a book in place of my normal procrastination" and received responses from students in other classes. I watched as a conversation about books exploded on our hashtag and my heart felt like it was going to burst! Then April Henry, the author of one of the books, joined in and my students were stunned. I could only smile. You won't find that in my official standards, but it's part of my "heart standards" because that's how you make a reader!

Like everyone in this room, I am a teacher because it's my vocation, not just my job. I can't imagine my life without my students. It's never boring and we never sit still for long and I love it that way! Standards come and go, regimes change, but teachers are steadfast. We impart our "heart standards" to our students and they leave imprints on our hearts.

Vignette: Meenoo Rami, Science Leadership Academy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Like many of you, I missed my students while being here. So, on Friday, I was able to Skype with my 11th graders back in Philadelphia at the Science Leadership Academy as they continue their work on a project in partnership with the National Public Radio affiliate KQED in California. We have taken on a very big question: Is college worth the cost and debt?

To answer this question, students have broken up into small groups and viewed this question from several angles. For example: How do we get more women involved in STEM majors and careers? Why is higher education so expensive? What is the true purpose of college? And I think you'll especially like this one: What are the highest paying majors, and are you really doomed if you major in English?

They have secured interviews with college students, professors, researchers, parents, even the superintendent of Philadelphia School District. And they are turning these interviews into multimedia pieces that integrate text, links, maps, and info graphics. These pieces will then be shared by KQED to generate conversations around this topic with students across the country.

Now, I know this kind of learning is not happening just in my classroom but also in classrooms across the country. I think this is the kind of experience our students need to learn and lead in our world. They need to take on rich, complex, and worthy questions, and they need to explore possible answers in collaboration with each other. There has been a lot of talk about the Common Core Standards this at this convention. Perhaps we need to think about ways to make joy, curiosity, and passion the standards of our classrooms.

So how do we make this happen?

Some of us will go back to our classrooms tomorrow and try to figure this out all over again. Our work is complex, and as my principal Chris Lehmann says, it should humble us.

But we can do this, if we connect beyond this weekend and sustain the energy, rejuvenation, and clarity we have found here at NCTE.

Whether you find your tribe on Twitter or use Facebook or walk across the hallway to talk to another teacher at your school, our work will be better if we are connected.

Our nation rightfully expects us to prepare the next generation of writers, thinkers, inventors, and leaders. To do our level best with this responsibility, we need to connect as a community of teachers on the local, national, and international levels to share best practices and support our students' learning. Just like our students, we need rich connections to colleagues near and far to make our own learning meaningful. So, let us keep talking and sharing, and I want to especially thank Sandy for her leadership and the entire NCTE community for making opportunities like this one possible.

Vignette: Nancie Atwell, Center for Teaching and Learning, Edgecomb, Maine

Across each school year, the seventh and eighth graders in my writing workshop engaged in a series of genre studies. Choosing their own topics, they wrote free verse, memoirs, reviews, short fiction, parodies, essays, sonnets, graduation speeches. Along the way, they discovered the uses of each genre—what it can do for a writer and how it can influence a reader. Because their writing was real, so was its impact.

As essayists, students took on the real work of advocating for causes they believed in. We generated a list of local nonprofits, and each chose an organi-

zation to champion. The goal was to write about it so well that our school's younger children would vote to award it a small grant—one of three—to support its work.

Sophia, a seventh grader, decided to advocate for Feed Our Scholars, a program that sends local students from impoverished families home on Friday afternoons with backpacks filled with meals for the weekend.

The class read powerful examples of advocacy journalism and teased out a list of features of the genre. Sophia called the director of Feed Our Scholars to request and schedule an interview. After the class generated baseline questions, she typed hers up on a laptop, then spent a morning onsite collecting information—history, logistics, statistics, quotes, and anecdotes.

Back at school, she experimented with leads until she found the direction for her essay. She ordered her information, drafted it, clarified and tightened it, played with alternative conclusions, brainstormed titles, and read and revised her text against the list of criteria her class had created. Finally, they collaborated on a second set of criteria, for how they wanted the younger students to judge the writing.

Sophia's eloquent essay was not one of the three that won over the littler kids. The kid it did win over was Sophia. The girl is on fire about food insecurity in America. Last month, as an eighth grader, she devoted a dawn-to-dusk Saturday to baking cookies, hundreds of cookies, and on Sunday set up a bake sale at her church that raised over \$700 for Feed Our Scholars, enough money for a year of weekend backpacks for three local families.

It seems to me that US teachers of writing are at a critical juncture. We can focus instruction on the bloodless language of the Common Core, or we can invite students to engage in worthwhile work that encompasses the standards and exceeds them, as kids learn about what writing is good for and the kinds of grown-ups they wish to become.

The goals that Sandy Hayes unearthed should remind us of why we became writing teachers in the first place: not to be technicians of test prep, but to help young people like Sophia become their *best selves*, contribute to the *development of a better society*, and build a *foundation for meaning in their lives*.

Sandy: Vignette 4

Last summer I was standing in line at a J.C. Penney where I seldom shop. I looked ahead at the clerk and with a shock thought, "She looks like Martha." I sneaked a peek at her nametag: *Martha*.

It was my turn. "I know that this might sound like a crazy question, but did you graduate from North Branch?" She looked up at me. "Mrs. Hayes!!!!" After thirty-four years, I had not expected her to recognize me, and I certainly didn't expect what she said next, "You, Mr. Monk, and Mr. King were my favorite teachers."

This humbled me. Ironically, Martha is so vivid in my memory because she was the kind of painfully shy student who is so easy to overlook in a class of

thirty students. She was so shy she could not call attention to herself to ask to go to the bathroom, let alone just leave, as she was about to be sick. I fervently hoped that I had been worthy of being her favorite teacher.

In the spring of 8th grade, Martha and her two best friends, also shy girls, in the kind of wildly unexpected, out-of-character actions of middle schoolers, performed in the yearly talent show. Patti strummed her guitar, singing along with Martha and Christy. The song was “Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore” — with all three of the girls singing in different keys.

But this isn’t really a story about Martha, as surprisingly courageous as her debut was. It’s about how surprising all kids can be. Despite the urgent, almost overwhelming need to release tension by laughing that even I felt, not one student in the audience of 700 giggled, snorted, hooted, laughed, or started a conversation with their friend. At the end of the song, the students honored the girls with honest, enthusiastic applause. I have never been prouder to be a middle school teacher.

Meeting Martha again after thirty-four years gave me the inspiration for this speech. We influence students’ lives in ways we cannot guess. In the stories we all have shared today, none of the relationships, joy in learning, pride, success, or connections with others depended on, or could be measured by, standards. But this is why we teach, why we need to celebrate every day the wondrous ways in which we all are human.