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Opening the Conversation

Reflections on the 2013 NCTE Convention

No matter how many times we have attended the NCTE Annual Convention—at least a dozen—we always return home energized, renewed, and idea-filled. This past Convention was no exception. In particular, we were inspired by NCTE president Ernest Morrell’s visit to the CEE Executive Committee meeting and his message regarding the 2014 Annual Convention theme—“Story as the Landscape of Knowing.” In the call for program proposals, Kathy G. Short, president-elect of NCTE, writes,

Story is the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers—our knowledge is ordered by story and understood by story. Our rich stockpiles of storied knowledge about literacy, curriculum, instruction, and students construct teaching as narrative in action. Stories are the touchstones and metaphors by which we conduct our professional lives, telling us who we are and who we can, or cannot become. They constrain and position our identities and roles as well as provide a way of knowing and of creating community among ourselves and with our students. (www.ncte.org/annual/call)

We agree with Kathy that story is at the heart of all we do—whether teaching fiction, having students share personal narratives, hearing from student teachers in the field, or catching up with each other every November.

In the CEE Executive Committee Meeting, held just prior to the beginning of the NCTE Annual Convention, Ernest talked about the political moment in which teachers and teacher educators are currently situated. Within this political moment, there are forces at work that delegitimize and threaten the fabric of public school education and the work of teacher educators. We all hear and read such stories every day, whether through social media, television news, newspapers, or word of mouth.

This connection between teacher education and “story” sparked some thoughts for us, thoughts about how we can rethink our political stance and take action to make changes. If we think about teacher education as a
story, this leads us to some questions in line with our disciplinary modes of thinking. Who is telling our story? What’s the plot line of this story? Who are the main characters? What is the theme or the motif of the story being told about teacher education in general, and specifically about English teacher education? The stakeholders in the storytelling are numerous—reformers, practitioners, evaluators, accreditors—including those of us who are doing the work of teacher education. Imagining ourselves as the storytellers of our field opens up possibilities for us to tell our story to outside audiences.

Peter Smagorinsky and Michael Moore have begun this storytelling by writing articles for their local newspapers that highlight the work of teachers and teacher educators in positive ways for audiences that tend to know little about our work or, worse, hear only the negative perceptions bruited about by legislators and organizations seeking to discredit the work of teacher education. All of us could consider following this model as a means of ensuring that our story is told.

In his brief presentation to the Executive Committee, Ernest brought a positive light to this time, in terms of the ability of educators to work together to correct the current narrative, indicating that “Legitimate reasons for optimism are contagious.”

What are those “legitimate reasons for optimism”? One reason for optimism is the potential for the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) to unite teachers and teacher educators from many disciplines and many organizations to support school change and educator learning. Developed in a joint project by NCTE and the Ball Foundation, NCLE boasts a long list of stakeholders, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Association for Career and Technical Education, the Association for Middle Level Education, the International Reading Association, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and many others. This coalition of professional educational organizations is poised, through its multifaceted projects, to “celebrate the work of successful school teams across the country that are achieving remarkable results in advancing literacy learning, and share what is learned with education policymakers” (http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/about/national-center-literacy-education).

So how can we, as English teacher educators, leverage the work that NCLE has begun? One suggestion is to publicize the recent NCLE report, “Remodeling Literacy Learning: Making Room for What Works” (http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/remodeling). This report, available on the Literacy in Learning Exchange website, reports key findings from
a nationally representative survey of educators. Among those findings are the following:

1. Literacy is not just the English teacher’s job anymore.
2. Working together is working smarter.
3. Schools aren’t structured to facilitate educators working together.
4. Many of the building blocks for remodeling literacy learning are in place.
5. Effective collaboration needs systemic support.

Also included in this report are recommendations for policymakers and powerful narratives about school change. Reading this report and then publicizing it to policymakers in our cities, states, and nationally is an important step that all of us can take to move from the sidelines and into the playing field in an era of uninformed reform efforts.

English teacher educators (and their students) can also take advantage of the Literacy in Learning Exchange in several ways, such as reading “Portraits of Change,” which are vignettes of inquiry work going on at various sites (http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/portraits-of-change); signing up for the weekly NCLE Smartbriefs, which deliver a range of literacy stories and suggestions (https://www.smartbrief.com/news/nclc/); and/or creating an inquiry group on NCLE (http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/groups).

Another reason for optimism is the myriad ways that social media has allowed us to communicate and collaborate. Whether using Facebook groups created by literacy teachers and teacher educators, Twitter and the various scheduled ed chats sponsored by NCTE (#nctechat) and NCTE members (#engchat, for example), we are bringing our ideas out of classrooms, schools, journals, books, and conferences into the wider world. As Ernest also told us at our CEE meeting: “There are no sidelines in a movement.”

The articles in this issue of *English Education* all tell “stories” of different kinds. In “Reclaiming English Education: Rooting Social Justice in Dispositions,” Janet Alsup and sj Miller present a case for centering social justice in literacy teacher preparation. They write, “Social justice . . . is a paradigm for thinking about injustices in schools, and how people arrive at and work for more equitable schooling practices . . . to provide youth powerful opportunities for real-time critical engagement” (p. 212). They provide a storyline regarding “who” has defined and determined social justice and dispositions over the years.
Jory Brass, in “Activist Teacher Education, Foucault, and the Case of Two English Teachers,” tells the story of his early attempts to use Foucault’s ideas in a graduate-level course. His message: “English educators also need to provide alternative visions of schools and society to guide the work of educational reform and social change” (p. 219). His article leads us to consider how we can use the concept of story in our work in P–16 settings. What are the perceptions of teacher education as a “story” being told, by us, by others? Who tells the story? What’s the plot line of this story? Who are the main characters? What is/are the theme(s)/motif(s)? Symbol(s)? Metaphor(s)? As Christina Berchini writes in this issue, “if English teacher educators were to engage in their own powerful brand of storyline around these issues, perhaps we would uncover powerful opportunities to accomplish our critical goals” (pp. 264–265).

As we continue to push forward with our work, we hope that the articles in this issue will assist in telling our stories in positive ways.