Shirley Wilson Logan

Sustaining NCTE Values

Three of NCTE's core values are writing, diversity, and advocacy.

Setting the Scene

had been a member of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) well before 1987, joining shortly after I began teaching English in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Public Schools. But it was only when I began attending Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) conventions that the organization became more than the headquarters' address, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois, where I sent my membership checks. Thus, what I write here is richly informed by my experience as a member of CCCC. I was reminded of its relationship to NCTE when I attended my first NCTE Executive Committee meeting and heard myself being introduced as chair of one of the "constituent" groups.

That first NCTE Annual Convention was the 1987 CCCC gathering in Atlanta, where we considered David Bartholomae’s convention theme, “The Uses of Literacy: A Writer’s Work In and Out of the Academy” (with Jacqueline Jones Royster as local arrangements chair). What I remember most about that convention was crowding into a session featuring Linda Flower, who, until that event, was only the name at the top of the College English article, “Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing.” This article, by exploring how we can guide students to move from writer-based to reader-based prose, was helping to reshape the field of composition studies.

Something else I recall from that convention is a crowded glass elevator in the Hyatt Regency Hotel, very much like the one past CCCC chair Wendy Bishop described in her convention poem some 14 years later at the 2001 CCCC convention in Denver:

"My convention poem is the swimming pool seen from the 24th floor going down fast on an outside vertigo elevator, the red eye strange city sunset, the looming awake by the rain-misted non-opening window of a barely inhabited room where the insufficient hairdryer and Mr. Coffee sing hey, diddle diddle to the waning moon together. (332)"

In “My Convention Poem,” Wendy captured all that is exhilarating and exhausting about an NCTE convention, where lifelong personal and disciplinary relationships develop.

Organizing conventions is one of NCTE’s most important functions. Locating a site, negotiating with vendors, establishing a theme and developing a program, arranging activities, coordinating registration, publicizing the event—in other words, creating spaces each year where reading and writing teachers at all levels can gather to develop new ideas and relationships and reaffirm established ones—are central to a thriving profession. It is for good reason that the CCCC mission statement begins its list of means by which the organization “supports and promotes the teaching and study of college composition and communication” with the activity “sponsoring meetings” (CCCC, “Mission Statement”). Of course, the organization has expanded this function by developing a variety of virtual opportunities to convene, such as e-workshops, Web seminars, blog spots, and virtual conferences. These Internet-based venues allow NCTE to expand its contributions to professional interaction and development.
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But it was my remembrance of that 1987 face-to-face meeting that led me to ask what kept me coming back, what sustained me for nearly 25 years and, more important for the future of the organization, what will sustain others? It has to be more than the opportunity to see and hear the disciplinary stars or to mix, mingle, and reunite with colleagues. We return and we become involved, I believe, because we are drawn to the core values of the organization, its willingness to change and adapt to new times and new challenges.

What Do We Value?

NCTE’s core values, posted on the website (http://www.ncte.org), are writing, literature, diversity, integrated language arts, knowledgeable and caring teachers, advocacy, and public education (“NCTE Core Values”). In the following discussion, I have chosen to focus on writing, diversity, and advocacy, considering just a few ways in which the organization supports these values and suggesting future directions for additional support. These three intersect at critical points with the remaining values.

The Value of Writing

NCTE is the principal professional organization supporting research and teaching in the field of writing and advocating writing as a central tool for learning, thinking, and communication. We, therefore, have a unique responsibility for helping other educators understand the value of writing across the curriculum and for understanding its appropriate uses in evaluation and assessment. (“NCTE Core Values”)

Considering the value of writing can take one in several directions, such as writing as a mode of learning, writing as meaning making, writing across the curriculum, writing and new media, writing as a form of expression. As my point of entry, however, I want to consider some of the often unstated assumptions about what good writing is and how students are taught to develop writing abilities for different purposes. I start here because all too often we assume that everyone knows what it is, who has the ability to produce it, and who does not.

The NCTE document that best addresses these assumptions has been in print for some time: the CCCC position statement Students’ Right to Their Own Language adopted in 1974 and reaffirmed in 2003. In it the three values—writing, diversity, and advocacy—converge. Although the statement does not attempt to do away with what many consider to be “standard” English, it does call for recognition of the use of the many dialects of English, spoken and written, as a right. While I do not intend to open up this debate here, I invoke this position statement as an example of NCTE’s consistent, documented support for a broader view of the many Englishes spoken and written throughout the country and by extension the world. How might NCTE continue to question what it means to teach English? How does the teaching of English change in an increasingly global community where most English is spoken and written by people who have never been to the United States or even communicated with Americans? How can NCTE help us as writing teachers expand our students’ understanding of the extent to which the dialect of American Standard Written English we offer them is one of many?

In an increasing number of venues, composition scholars such as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu are calling for translingual approaches to the teaching of writing, approaches that move away from what Horner calls a “tacit policy of monolingualism” (1) that denies the always already presence of a linguistically heterogeneous discourse. Perhaps it is time for NCTE to issue a Students’ Right 2.0 policy statement calling for more explicit recognition of the multilingual and the multidialectical nature of the various Englishes in which we teach our students to write. Such a statement would encourage writing teachers not only to value the varieties of English our students bring to our classes but also to create opportunities for incorporating these varieties into their composing processes. Contemporary scholars such as Vershawn Young and such as Suresh Canagarajah, who has also called for an updated Students’ Right, prefer to call such writing practices code meshing rather than code
switching, to move away from the image of an on-off switch of correctness or appropriateness toward an image of fluid movement among various linguistic groupings.

NCTE has published articles and books on this topic. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva’s collection *Language Diversity in the Classroom* is one salient example, and, of course, many other NCTE and CCCC position statements refer to the importance of linguistic diversity. A more direct articulation of this writing value and its implementation would not, I think, be superfluous in that it would promote more intentional efforts in this direction.

Closely related to this emphasis is a renewed concern for exposing our students to languages other than English, given that we are still debating the English Only question. We need to link our recognition of the variety of Englishes to a stronger emphasis on the acquisition of other languages. An August 20, 2010, *Wall Street Journal* article, “What if ‘English Only’ Isn’t Wrong? Do Americans Need to Be Bilingual, and Will Technology Smash the Language Barrier for Good?” identifies a growing trend in the United States away from learning foreign languages (Goldstein). Catherine Porter’s Modern Language Association (MLA) “Presidential Address 2009: English Is Not Enough” is still another example of the growing concern about the national decline of interest in learning a second language. Perhaps NCTE could bring its influence to bear on this issue more explicitly as well. It could be our way of saying we are professional allies in resisting what Porter refers to as our “all-too-American ideology of monolingual sufficiency” (548).

NCTE has already affirmed in various statements its commitment to international involvement in global English and to professional communication with others beyond our borders. As an organization with *English* in its name, NCTE will do well to continue publishing articles, books, and position statements promoting multilingual and international approaches to teaching, research, and learning. Incorporating such approaches does not erase the importance of engaging all languages appropriately. There is still plenty of work to do as
we provide writers with greater linguistic flexibility. Even the recently NCTE-instituted National Day on Writing, by involving writers outside the academy, takes an important step in that direction.

The Value of Diversity

The English/Language Arts classroom can and should be a unique place to develop voice as well as to respect and to hear all voices. It is the place where many students learn they have a right to their own language, where multiple forms of literacy are explored, where censorship is abhorred, and where difference is valued in pursuit of an education befitting a democracy. Members benefit from opportunities to work with and hear from colleagues with varying backgrounds and experience; to study, question and critique dominant and often assumed societal stances; to learn how to create classrooms where students develop voices that make them effective participants in academic and public discourses; and, from opportunities to learn how to make their classrooms more relevant, more inclusive, and more critical to the lives of the learners they teach and the society in which they teach. (“NCTE Core Values”)

I have quoted the entire diversity value statement above because of the connectedness of its assertions. Diversity can be a slippery, chameleonic term that means “different” only with respect to other people. Whiteness studies, race, and rhetoric scholar Joyce Irene Middleton writes of this definitional challenge in her piece “Against Diversity” in which she argues that the term frequently implies a binary between a dominant or majority culture and those aspiring to participate in it; in this pairing the gaze is always outward from a position of strength or privilege, while this position itself remains unexamined, resulting, as Middleton adds, in so many spaces that structure non-white people as spectators of all white spaces (and as listeners of all white discourses) (“Against Diversity”). While the term diversity comes with heavy baggage, the value it aims to capture is critical in an organization of language arts teachers. Phrases such as “all voices,” “multiple forms of literacy,” “more inclusive,” and “varying backgrounds and experience” in the diversity value statement above signal a desire to be responsive to multiple meanings that the term conveys.

The NCTE statement may not be as limited—or as comprehensive—as various NCTE constituencies desire, and the gaze is still essentially outward toward imagined others. It is a stance that does not fully respond to Middleton’s call to “explore and clarify significant intersections between race, whiteness, and diversity” (“Against Diversity”). Yet the NCTE statement does include the aim to “critique dominant and often assumed societal stances,” an aim that acknowledges the need for conversations and actions that call attention to the unexamined postures of dominant culture.

The organization can be credited with various initiatives designed to encourage this value. CCCC, for example, offers financial support to various categories of participants so that they can attend the Annual Convention and thus ensure diverse representation. The Chairs’ Memorial Scholarship, the Scholars for the Dream Travel Award, the Professional Equity Project Grants, and the Tribal College Faculty Fellowship also all work toward that goal. NCTE currently posts at least 29 statements affirming or reaffirming various kinds of diversity (“NCTE Position Statements on Diversity”). Furthermore, NCTE has established a variety of committees charged to address diversity issues, including the CCCC Committee on Diversity. This committee maintains a lively blogspot “CCCC Conversations on Diversity” where important posts, such as Paula Gillespie’s “How Writing Centers Create Mini-Successes for Language Diversity and Latin@ Students,” spark discussions. It is clear, then, that NCTE has made and is making important moves to support this diversity value. The nagging question remains, How do we increasingly frame these activities and conversations with attention to the pace at which our world is changing, an attention that allows us, as Gillespie writes, to earnestly “critique dominant and often assumed societal stances”?

The Value of Advocacy

Members benefit by being kept up-to-date on issues of politics and public policy, by having a collective voice to speak to legislators and policymakers, by having support in fighting censorship, by having resolutions and position statements to use in local settings to argue for informed policy,
category titled Community, Civic & Public, inviting closer attention to advocacy directed outwardly. In addition, NCTE has been consistently vocal in its opposition to the test-driven provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an opposition that has come from all levels and on numerous occasions. See, for example, NCTE’s strong statement against the act’s Reading First Initiative and its attempt to impose the same teaching methods on all teachers (Resolution).

Within NCTE there is also a sustained advocacy for labor equity for writing teachers. CCCC offers the Professional Equity Project grants, mentioned above, to bring more writing teachers into advocacy conversations at the Annual Convention, and supports the Committee on Part-time, Adjunct or Contingent Labor. Certainly, there is still much work to be done in this area of status and pay inequities between those who teach most of our college writing classes and those who study the teaching of composition and theorize about it. These inequities abound in spite of the 1987 CCCC Wyoming Resolution and the subsequent “Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing.” They persist in spite of statements and resolutions on class size and teacher workload in secondary and college settings, and on improving conditions for English language arts teaching generally. NCTE, in partnership with other professional organizations, must continue the advocacy work it has carried out over the years and to seek new, sustainable methods to support its core value of advocacy in ways that would bring about the substantive reform Lovas called for.

An organization of scholar-teachers whose subject is the effective use and interpretation of language, from kindergarten through college and beyond, NCTE will always have a central role to play in a society dependent upon citizens equipped with essential communicative skills. How effectively NCTE performs this role will depend upon continuing adherence to its core values. This piece has tried to consider how NCTE demonstrates its commitment to three of those values—writing, diversity, and advocacy—paying attention to points of convergence along the way, and imagining how these values might inspire, challenge, and sustain us in the years to come.

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Note

1. Middleton adds the following in an email message to the author: “In effect, from a dominant or majority point of view, diversity can mean anything, including things unrelated to culture, race, or whiteness, e.g., diversity of biological life, diverse points of view, diversity of tools, diversity of ethnicities.”

Works Cited


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NCTE 70 YEARS AGO

From English Journal:

In presenting the recent publication of the National Council, Educating for Peace, I realize all too clearly that again in the United States the machinery of war is in motion and that whatever we do as individuals or small groups will have little effect on our destiny. This volume, however, is not futile, for it undertakes to face the issue boldly, espousing no sectarian or facile solution, but maintaining throughout an insistence upon the criminal folly of war. (406)