Leila Christenbury

Then and Now: The Thoughts of NCTE Members in 1960 and in 2010

Learning our history has been one of the great pleasures of working on the centennial of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), a project I began in 2003 that is now almost finished. As part of my centennial work, I took a sabbatical from my university and spent eight months at NCTE in Urbana, Illinois, working and planning with staff and doing research in the two archive locations, NCTE headquarters and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. At both sites I read, sorted, and photocopied literally hundreds of documents, letters, minutes, photographs, tapes, records, policy reports, plans, statements, memos, and publications. The research informed many NCTE centennial projects: the centennial book, banner, video, website, the weekly Inbox “Blast from the Past,” the Annual Convention “Moment of History” delivered at the meeting of the Board of Directors, the proposed state affiliate projects, and this centennial issue of English Journal. Initially, I had planned to examine almost every item in both archives, but even eight months of steady work was not enough to achieve that goal, and there are still some archival materials I have yet to explore.

My work in the archives was solitary but never lonely; I felt in the company of the thousands of people whose life devotion was to English teaching and learning, and I left my research with a greater respect for what has gone on before and for those individuals who selflessly gave such time and energy to the profession. We do more than stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before; we owe them the foundation of our organization and its principles.

This centennial, of course, is not the only time NCTE has looked backwards to its history. A case in point is the 1960 golden anniversary, celebrated at the 50th annual convention, held in Chicago where the organization was founded. The 1960 Convention program is a handsome, 64-page, oversized publication, replete with photographs, drawings, and essays, and it contains both the Convention session schedule and, in the front matter, articles that trace not only some of the history of NCTE but also look to the future. In particular, in the issue are pages devoted to a series of topics to which a small group of invited individuals respond. The topics are:

- What to Expect in the Year 2010
- The Change I Would Most Like to See in English Teaching During the Next 50 Years
- Ten of the Important Studies in Research in English
- Important Unsolved Problems in Research in English
- A Book That Has Influenced My Thinking about the Teaching of English
- What Worries Me Most about the Teaching of English
- A Convention I Especially Remember (13–17, 20–32)

I thought it would be interesting to revisit these, and in October 2010, 50 years after these were first addressed, NCTE agreed to send out an
email survey to members, asking them to respond to the seven topics, now rephrased into questions. For each topic, participants were encouraged to write fewer than 100 words and, if they wished, to give permission for quotation.

Approximately 440 members responded to the email survey, and they were a somewhat heterogeneous group. About 7% of the respondents are new to the profession and have been involved in literacy education for four years or less. Fifteen percent have been involved in literacy education for five to ten years; 22% for 11–19 years; 21% for 20–29 years; and 35% of the respondents had been in the profession for more than 30 years. Looking at teaching level, of the 440 respondents, only 4% teach at the elementary level. The bulk of the respondents, 40%, teach at the grades 6–12 level, 8% at the two-year college level, and almost half are at the four-year college or university level.

What do these NCTE members say in 2010, and how does it differ from those who wrote in 1960? Let’s turn to the questions.

**What is a book that has influenced your thinking about the teaching of English?**

In 1960, nine individuals, among whom were the well-known Walter Loban, Marshall McLuhan, and Louise Rosenblatt, responded. The books they selected were, not surprisingly, idiosyncratic, and most of the titles do not relate to teaching English per se. In addition, many of the works cited are not read widely today (such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Film Sense*, Suzanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*, and Siegfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture*). One work praised was Goethe’s *Faust*, and Joseph Mersand, a former NCTE president, lauded another former NCTE president, Lou LaBrant, for her *The Teaching of Literature in the Secondary School*. It may interest some readers to know that Louise Rosenblatt chose as her influential book I.A. Richards’s *Practical Criticism*, only to note that the work “demonstrated how little traditional teaching had accomplished toward helping students to handle critically their own responses to poetry” (25).

Turning to the 2010 survey, the work that is cited the most frequently is Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*, followed by Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* and Kylene Beers’s *When Kids Can’t Read*. The following received the same number of citations: Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Explo-ration*, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Kelly Gallagher’s *Readicide*. Other titles mentioned repeatedly are, listed here in alphabetical order: *Bird by Bird* (Anne Lamott); *The English Teacher’s Companion* (Jim Burke); *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It* (Cris Tovani); *Lives on the Boundary* (Mike Rose); *Making the Journey* (Leila Christenbury); *Mosaic of Thought* (Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmermann); *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (Erika Lindemann); *Teaching Adolescent Writers* (Kelly Gallagher); *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (James Moffett); *Ways with Words* (Shirley Brice Heath); *What a Writer Needs* (Ralph Fletcher); *Wondrous Words* (Katie Wood Ray); *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Donald Murray); *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (James Moffett); *Writing with Power* (Peter Elbow); and “You Gotta BE the Book” (Jeffrey Wilhelm).

**What in your opinion are some of the most important studies in research in English?**

In the 1960 golden anniversary program, former NCTE president Margaret Early and the Committee on Research tackled this question, noting ten specific studies, some of which were written by individuals still well-known today (e.g., Walter Loban, Charles C. Fries, Albert H. Marckwardt, and Lou LaBrant). While Early writes that the studies and their selection were certainly “arbitrary and subjective,” she felt that they were “representative of fifty-year trends in research in teaching” (20). Predictably, as the years have gone on, many of the research studies cited have faded in importance; for instance, we no longer read the 1930 work by Dorothea McCarthy, the 1945 study by Henry D. Rinsland, the 1927 study by Nancy G. Coryell, and Chester W. Harris’s work in 1948.

Will the same be true 50 years from now, when NCTE members look at the 2010 survey?

In the 2010 survey, researchers rather than the studies themselves are noted in answer to this question, and the most frequent name cited is George Hillocks Jr. followed by Janet Emig. Arthur N. Applebee is a close third, and James Britton and Mina Shaughnessy tie for fourth. Other influential researchers more frequently listed are, in alphabeti-
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The widespread use of television, tapes, and films will result in a more standardized English curriculum throughout the United States (14), and “there will be greater specialization in the training for teaching secondary English . . . teachers will have such titles as . . . Reading Skills Specialist” (14). One contributor in 1960 saw a simplification of classroom film showing which would obviate “cumbersome equipment . . . and screens” (14), certainly a reality that CDs have effected. Block scheduling was anticipated by the writers as was the growth of the English language. Yet, as G. Robert Carlsen wrote, “Teachers will . . . be much the same as they are today, coming from the same backgrounds, subject to the same fears, and pleased by the same rewards” (14).

In the 2010 survey, technology dominates the answers. Numbers of respondents envision in 50 years a general increase in the use of technology tools, in e-books, in distance learning, in technology as a literary medium, and in multimodal literacy. Student-led and interactive education will be a more prevalent teaching methodology in 50 years, and a continued care for the content of English is also noted. One person sums it up well: “The ability to communicate in rhetorically savvy ways will be even more important than it is today, but ‘English’ as it is now being taught will need to change to accommodate the needs of a tech-driven society.” English will be, according to another individual, “multi-media, multi-sensory, multi-textual.” One respondent, with a clear sense of humor, believes that in 50 years we will certainly offer two new courses: “Late 20th Century Email Sentimentality” and “The History of Facebook.”

What to you are important unsolved problems in research in English?

In 1960, the question addressed the year 2010, and two pages in the golden anniversary program detailed what seven individuals thought would happen in that year. They posited both the obvious (“the spread and establishment of fine children’s libraries in each elementary school” [13]) and were reflective of the technology of the time ("[t]ape recorders will be as common as chalk is today” [13]). Some of the predictions are eerily on target for this computer age: “children will have silent typewriters at their desks . . . and will type quite fast by sixth grade” (13); “[t]he style of handwriting will suffice rather than the two now competing for time and energy” (13). In addition, the writers predicted “the widespread use of television, tapes, and films and will result in a more standardized English curriculum throughout the United States” (14), and “there will be greater specialization in the training for teaching secondary English . . . teachers will have such titles as . . . Reading Skills Specialist” (14). One contributor in 1960 saw a simplification of classroom film showing which would obviate “cumbersome equipment . . . and screens” (14), certainly a reality that CDs have effected. Block scheduling was anticipated by the writers as was the growth of the English language. Yet, as G. Robert Carlsen wrote, “Teachers will . . . be much the same as they are today, coming from the same backgrounds, subject to the same fears, and pleased by the same rewards” (14).

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What do you expect in English teaching in the year 2061?

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What to you are important unsolved problems in research in English?

In 1960, the six individuals who responded to this question noted issues of widespread illiteracy, the teaching of literature and literary appreciation, the teaching of language and communication, and the testing of oral skills. Thomas D. Horn, however, seems to forecast what a few decades later was to be termed the “reading wars”:

“We are currently hearing a great deal about two different approaches to the teaching of reading . . . one, the phonics approach, is based upon the
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assumption that the sounds a letter or letters represent are sufficiently constant to allow a beginning reader to use only sounds, consistently and effectively, when attacking a word. Proponents of this approach imply that “it is time we get back to fundamentals.” Proponents of the second [are] called the “individualized” or “self-selection” approach (as opposed to basal programs). (24)

Also echoing some of the debates today, Ralph C. Staiger wondered in 1960 if literature should be jettisoned in favor of teaching “English skills” (24).

The 2010 respondents are overwhelmingly agreed that student motivation and engagement is the major unsolved problem. Other unsolved problems cited include the use of technology and new literacies, differentiated instruction, the effective teaching of writing, the effective teaching of grammar and usage, high-stakes testing, and the preparation of teachers of English. One extensive comment from a respondent sketches a more global commentary:

The problems can be framed in a few key questions: *Why are students asked to read what is markedly beyond their comprehension level, e.g., classics that were written for adults and not inexperienced readers? *Can the “literacy crisis” be confronted by revising our curriculum so that student reading becomes motivated by interest and not the assumption that “cultural literacy” is the starting point for education? *Can we come to terms with the fact that writing skills as we supposedly teach them are not . . . relevant to the lives of most students?

What is one change you would most like to see in English teaching in the next 50 years?

In the 1960 golden anniversary program, eight NCTE members offered a number of changes they wished to see. A more cohesive interdisciplinary education, a more scholarly teaching force, and a more widespread membership in professional organizations were all noted. In addition, better cooperation among the levels of education, better teacher training, and a stop to the “cold war between educationist and liberal arts professors” (17) were also on the list. One individual, Paul Diederich, posited six specific changes he would like to see at the high school level, among which are class limits of 24 students, two days a week of free reading, English classes that meet for only two days a week, and, in what is today a very politically incorrect suggestion, writing assignments that would not burden the English teacher but would “be graded and corrected by a reader (a specially qualified college-educated housewife)” (17).

The 2010 survey shows that changes that the respondents wish to see are evenly divided across a number of areas: smaller class size, less focus on the canon, use of interdisciplinary approaches, more focus on students and less on content, fewer high-stakes tests, the effective use of technology, and more authentic teaching and assessment. Regarding the profession, respondents hope for fair pay, respect, professional support, and more effective teacher preparation. One comment addresses English teachers’ roles as “inoculators against the toxic virus of debased political discourse in this country” and calls for the profession to “put at the center of our work the job of teaching students about the never-ending civic conversation that is the lifeblood of democracy.” In a similar vein, another writes:

The one change that I would most like to see deals with framing English teaching democratically—as defined by equal and fair representation of voices and modes, perspectives and performances in English language spaces, indeed, to press for and insist on a transformative tilt on curricula, instruction, and assessment that affirms and respects, utilizes and enhances the lives of diverse youth.

What worries you most about education in general and about the teaching of English?

Ten individuals responded in 1960, and the worries were varied. For Albert R. Kitzhaber, it was everything: “our profession offers so many promising things to worry about” (29), he wryly noted. For others, it involved the challenge of American education, “Never has any educational system committed itself to the teaching of a national standard language on so vast a scale” (28), the difficulty of defining English as a subject area, the difficulty teachers have “break[ing] through that student’s shell of resistance” (28), and concerns about effective teacher preparation. For Richard Braddock,
the solution was in a more professional teaching force:

If we had more English teachers who were intelligent, well informed, and skilled in their specialty, they themselves would solve many of the . . . problems in due time. (30)

For those who wrote in 2010, scripted instruction is a major concern. One person writes:

My interns (both at the middle and high school level) express disappointment with their teaching duties. It is not for a lack of passion for the profession. Rather it is because the districts have adopted scripted curricula . . . a passion for creativity, literature, and writing brought many of us into the profession. Sadly, development of those passions is being arrested.

Other top worries cited include government involvement in education, testing, recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, and, in the classroom, an excessive focus on skills and “not enough on student needs and understanding.” As with the answers to the “change I would like most to see,” student engagement is a concern in 2010 as are students who lack basic skills or are unprepared for challenging work. A need for increased school funding is also a frequent worry. Finally, the Common Core Standards also inspired one person to write:

Given that we have just institutionalized a national curriculum, my main worry is that English teachers will see this not as an opportunity to think generatively about how they can teach these standards in their own manner, in their own classrooms, but that we will succumb to the mantra that “what gets measured gets treasured.” We can use the standards as a tool to express our professionalism and be creative with how to teach them, or we can be told what to do . . . and accept it. Let’s be creative!
What is an NCTE Convention you especially remember?

Interestingly, all the six respondents to this question in the 1960 golden anniversary program are women. Gender bias or no, all appear to have had warm and memorable times at NCTE conventions. Edna Jones recalls a “Spanish atmosphere of gaiety” (31) at the 1953 Convention banquet and hearing Carl Sandburg speak there. For Marion Zollinger, the 1952 Convention was “enchantment” (31), and listening to Archibald MacLeish—although he “imperturbably reduced” (31) his hour speech to 15 minutes—was a high point. Sarah I. Roody remembers the NCTE Convention as “thrilling,” especially because she was doing her first ever presentation on the program (31), and for Marion C. Sheridan, the 1949 Convention was memorable as it was there where it was “firmly settled . . . [that NCTE] Conventions would be held only where all members could attend and stay in the headquarters hotel and attend meetings” (31; emphasis in the original).

For those who responded to the 2010 survey, the Annual Convention memories are as varied as the number (more than 40) of Conventions cited. Both NCTE luminaries and famous name speakers are frequently noted, as are memorable debates in sessions (James Moffett and Miles Myers; Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae). One person met Donald Graves “without realizing it”; another “met Nancie Atwell waiting in line,” and a third “sat on the floor next to Lucy Calkins to hear Diane Ravitch.” One respondent fell asleep “exhausted from my high school teaching at the time, as James Moffett recited a Zen koan—and I think I absorbed something of his spirit through osmosis in the process.” Speakers Maya Angelou, Junot Diaz, Amy Tan, Frank McCourt, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Cornel West, and Bill Moyers, among many others, are all cited. Two comments from respondents, one from a member who has never been to a Convention and one from a person who has been to 40 of them, make a suitable end to this piece and are, indeed, a testament to the power of NCTE:

I have not been to any convention. They are scheduled at times when I cannot attend. However, I must stress how important the NCTE has been in encouraging me when the daily stupidities are so demoralizing. The NCTE’s journal articles showcase teachers who fight the good fight, from the trenches, without losing heart. So many good ideas have come my way!

And:

My first [convention was] in Atlanta, GA (c.1970). I don’t remember so much the speakers or the sessions but the opportunity that it provided to hear different voices and share different classroom experiences. I was a captive audience, and forty conventions later, I still feel the same surge of energy. NCTE conventions are the highlight of my year. Although my school was never able to pay for my expenses, I feel that the experience has paid me professionally, and kept me alive for 47 years in the classroom.

Note

Many thanks to my graduate assistant Breah Samuels who compiled the data efficiently and well. When asked about her own responses to the survey, Breah observed, “it was very interesting to see the wide range of opinions of NCTE members. . . . When you hear so much about the struggle of pedagogies between teachers and governing bodies, it can be easy to forget about the many varying schools of thought within the profession itself.”

Works Cited


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—Leilla Christenbury, NCTE Past President and Chair, Task Force on Council History

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