kneel down beside Diedra, who has chosen for her independent reading a collection of short stories. At first, she is so into her reading that she does not even realize I am there. This is bad for me, because now I am pretty sure I am going to end up making her jump out of her seat when I say hello. Then again, good for her; what is better than being lost in a book?

Realizing this, immediately, right here awkwardly perched on one knee in the second before startling Diedra, I am caught in a tension, one that exists in my mind because it exists in the field of literacy education. Should I speak or leave her alone? On one side of the tension in our field are people like Stephen Krashen and Nancie Atwell who might tell me to be quiet and let her read, since it is the experience of sustained engagement with meaningful text that will lead her to all she needs to know about reading. Those people can be pretty persuasive. On the other side of the issue are people like P. David Pearson, Carol Booth Olson, Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia L. Greenleaf, and Lucy McCormick Calkins, among others, who think that evidence suggests that it is important to provide students with external support for particular, valued habits of thinking in the midst of their reading. That is pretty much the team I play on (R. Bomer, *Building, “Reading”), and that is what made me kneel down here in the first place. But at a moment like this, worrying about Diedra’s concentration and engagement, I do, for just a second, hear the controversy anew in my mind.

NCTE as a Teaching Conversation

No moment of teaching is an island, entire of itself. Every move I make, every decision to speak or keep silent, every utterance emerges out of a larger ongoing professional conversation, as unfinished now as it was a hundred years ago when that first *English Journal* (*EJ*) appeared. My specific moves as a teacher are turns at talk in that conversation, and in each chosen move, I assert my present theoretical commitments and my identification with particular other individuals and communities in the field. From this ongoing dialogue with literacy educators, I take not just teaching methods but a specific, affiliated professional identity. NCTE, for me, represents that conversation, and every moment of my teaching arises out of a confluence of histories, ideas, and energies that I often think of as represented by NCTE. It is like a synecdoche, that figure of speech wherein a part stands for the whole.

I want here to attempt to trace some of the ways large-scale professional conversations shape very small details of teaching practice in one particular moment of one particular day, to show just a little bit of how the literacy professional community generally, and NCTE in particular, are present in my moment-to-moment pedagogical decision making. I do not mean my thinking comes from the NCTE headquarters in Urbana, Illinois, or the Annual Convention, or even the official policies of the Council, but my thinking does undoubtedly come from a conversation, a community of practice (Lave and Wenger; Wenger), and a set of traditions that are named better by the words National Council...
Just the fact that Diedra has chosen a book to read in her English class rather than choosing one from a uniform list connects to the very founding of NCTE a century ago. That founding occurred in a time, like today, when preparation for the first year of college dominated thinking about what should be valued in a high school curriculum. (Unlike today, the actual US government was not involved back then.) To standardize the entrance exams and require writing about particular works of literature, a group of universities created the Uniform Lists, which motivated many teachers to limit students’ reading experiences to one shared classic book at a time. Some of NCTE’s founding members were opposed to that level of control in reading and preferred extensive reading of a wide range of books (Applebee), and it was largely to state their opposition to the Uniform Lists that they founded NCTE (Hook). Founded in opposition to standardization, in resistance against the bad ideas of their day, the first sentence of the first article ever in EJ was this: “No” (Hopkins 1). Through in reply to a different question, it is just what Diedra’s English teacher, Ms. Reyes, is saying to the pressures to standardize and control that she feels every day.

I speak, and sure enough, Diedra jumps and then sort of laughs, looking around to see if anyone saw her. “What did you say?” she asks.

“I am just asking how things are going with your reading today, what you are mostly thinking about.”

“Bullies,” she says, turning the book so that I can see the cover. It is a collection of short stories about bullying.

“So how are you thinking about this big idea of bullying?” I ask.

“It is just like, if someone’s picking on you just to show that they’re superior,” she says.

**Teaching from a Community of Practice**

In my reading conferences today, I have been trying, whenever appropriate, to get students thinking interpretively about the larger, perhaps unstated, point to the text they are reading. I am visiting this middle school, working alongside teachers in their reading workshops. At the beginning of this reading workshop, I did a minilesson about point-driven reading (Vipond and Hunt), something I heard Russell Hunt present about at an NCTE Convention maybe 20 years ago. It is one way of talking about the act of interpreting—an act I think of readers doing across time, across the reading of a text, not something they find lying there in the text itself, maybe somewhere near the end. In the minilesson, I asked them about the story they had read with their teacher a few days before, “Priscilla and the Wimps” (Peck). As soon as the teacher told me about it, I recognized the title as being from *Sixteen*, that first collection of stories by young adult authors edited by Don Gallo, a hero to many of us in NCTE who care about kids having access to literature written especially for them. During the minilesson, after discussing this idea of stories having a kind of point, I asked the students what came to mind with that story. Predictably, at first, some attempted to tell the story rather than making interpretive statements. But gradually, they found a sort of thinking that moved in a direction I would call interpretive.

“You don’t mess around with a big girl’s friend.” I was not sure about that as interpretation, but I certainly liked the way it sounded, plus it made me laugh very hard. Another student said, “Priscilla was the wood, but she turned into the fire.” I would never have thought to say that, and as I thought about it, it seemed that there were about six thoughts compressed into that one metaphor. I repeated it, and the rest of the class had to do some substantial interpretive work figuring out how it might apply to the story, but we were getting somewhere.

As usual, I was a little uneasy, too, trying to assess the value of what we were doing. I felt the presence of trusted colleagues, even beyond the three teachers in the room with me. I felt the judgment, I suppose, of NCTE colleagues, who might have said that this asking for a point might be leading the students to these single sentence utterances, like little morals. I was not certain, for instance, thinking about conversations with Sheridan Blau or Donna Santman about interpretation, that they would be satisfied with this as interpretive thinking.
I thought I needed to try to loosen the language a bit, and thinking of Louise Rosenblatt and her emphasis on process, I tried to situate interpreting as an action in time. I asked the students at what point they began to have a hunch about the point of the story, and answers varied, mostly coming fairly late in the narrative. "What about when you heard the title?," I asked. "What did you think then?"

One person volunteers, "I thought it would be about a group of people who were not strong, people who were wimps."

"Oh, that is interesting," I said. "You were thinking about power and who would have it in this story right from the get-go. Your mind was getting ready to think about how some people had more power than others, who had it, who did not, who was above whom. You were already making ideas." Many NCTE members will recognize what I was doing here, from their own teaching and that of close colleagues. I try to accept what kids say and then enlarge it, partly because that is what we each have to do in our own minds—accept some thoughts that occur to us, lame as they may be, and then build upon them. I try to hold the kid’s contribution—even if it seems obvious or a little off—in my hands, and then reframe it a bit, so that it has enlarged potential for exploration. It is similar to what Katherine Bomer writes about in Hidden Gems—respectfully regarding student writing as if it were the published work of a contemporary author, so that we can teach craft through the nascent moves students are already making, however un-knowing. I know that no one explicitly told me I should receive students’ turns at talk this way, and if they had, I probably could not have understood it. It is something I learned from watching colleagues do it, in conversation with students and with one another. I picked it up like a virus from my professional community.

"Now," I say, "think about your independent reading book that you are going to start reading in just a minute. What is your hunch about the point of that? Turn to someone beside you and tell them your hunch about that so far, even if you only know the title of the book."

After about three minutes, I pull them back and ask what they are thinking. Despite our small progress with talking about "Priscilla and the
Wimps,” they seem to be drawn, when talking about their independent books, to retelling their books’ plots. Even when I interrupt to ask again about the point or big idea, they drift back to the story. I think there are at least two explanations for this. One is that talking about an abstraction as the point of a story—the act of interpreting—is exactly in their zone of proximal development as a group, a practice they are able to engage with help, but that independently is just out of reach (Vygotsky). The other possibility is that there is something in the speech situation that summons this kind of language from them, namely, that neither I nor the other students have read their book and so would need, in their view, a summary before getting to a more abstracted analysis. So as I release them from the minilesson, I have this question in my mind about how individuals are going about interpreting, and one purpose for my one-on-one conferences will be to support their thinking toward ideas, themes, interpretive moves, and connections.

Growing through—and into—Conversations

That is what I am wondering, talking with Diedra, when I decide just to look for trouble about how we might conceptualize the notion of bullying. I remember Tom Newkirk talking about unmasking our own thinking in reading as looking for trouble, and that is what I want to do now with Diedra. I am hoping that, by engaging her in a conversation about the idea, we might together move her thinking thus far toward a richer, more developed set of concepts.

It is, as a matter of fact, a kind of conversation I often have with longtime colleagues, at NCTE Conventions or other events, by email or social networking sites, in writing or on the phone. It is talk that begins with a simple account of what has been up lately but then someone takes hold of the ideas and elevates them. For a while, my thinking gets better, and when the great machine of the conversation lowers me back down into my daily thinking, I can still see things—my work, my reading—from that conceptually elevated plane.

I say to Diedra, “So let’s think about some situations. What if I come to you and confront you because you stole my book bag. Would I be bullying you?”

“Maybe,” she says, “because the person might have stole from you just to pick on you.”

I am a little confused at this. “So in that case, you would be bullying, but I do not think I would be bullying just because I yelled at you about taking something from me. You’d be the bully then.”

“Yes,” she says. “Because the person would be picking on you.” I can see from her pronoun shifting that she does not really like the role play I have cast her in, is uncomfortable being in the narrative about bullying, on either side of the story.

“So I guess you are thinking it has to do with why the one person is picking on the other person—their motivation. Like you said before, it is bullying if they’re trying to dominate, to be superior.”

The conference I am having with Diedra, trying to follow her initial thoughts and support them toward more complex interpreting, is not necessarily going to show up on test scores. Though the state standards—like the Common Core Standards—do promote interpretive thinking as a goal in English language arts, the assessments tend to value students’ disposition to fall in line behind a particular, authoritative interpretation—bubbling in the “best” answer. One of the ways that NCTE provides a context for my teaching is by attempting to influence policy, so that I and other teachers retain the ability to make professional judgments in the interests of our students and according to the expertise developed in our discipline. The Council has not won all those battles, it is plain to see, but its efforts have been improving. It gives me heart to know that a vision of the world I am trying to create in and through classrooms is also in the mind of people talking to policymakers. And I know, too, that I can be a part of those conversations at every level of policy, and when I do so, I will not be alone. I can carry stories and knowledge about particular students like Diedra to legislators, and NCTE colleagues will be laying other stories down right beside mine. In an environment where policy sometimes squeezes out actual teaching, even a small influence on shaping that policy is another important pedagogical act.

The Decision Pool

I ask Diedra to talk to me a little about how this big idea of bullying works in each of the stories in the book. She flips to one, which she says includes...
some discussion at the beginning of the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado and how the kids who became the shooters had been kind of smaller and so had been bullied, and that that is what made them violent. We talk about how bullying creates an environment where violence becomes more likely, and she says that environment just gets remade over and over. She says that is like this other story where a girl attempts suicide out of her despair about her friend’s experience of being bullied. We talk for a minute about how, really, more than two people would almost always be involved in bullying, and she mentions how that comes out in a couple of other stories.

At this point in the conference, thoughts are rushing into a pooling place in my mind. I think, for example, of a recent special issue of English Journal (March 2009), guest edited by Paula Ressler and Becca Chase, on sexual identity and gender variance that included a poem about a brutalized daughter (Miller) and another article in which a teacher invited students to explore the perspectives of people involved in the 2008 murder of Lawrence King, a gay teen (Freedman). I am reminded that bullying becomes a social issue, instead of just a matter of personal morality, when the experience is distributed by unchosen membership in particular groups, some of whom enjoy unearned privileges (R. Bomer and K. Bomer). That is, bullying is an event more often than not perpetrated by individuals identifying with heterosexual privilege upon people they perceive as queer, as being differently a boy or girl. Even small body size can create that kind of vulnerability, but the fault line of privileging physical aggression does connect to the bullying experienced by many, many people who grow up to be gay and lesbian. I think, too, of a point that Roxanne Henkin has made, in NCTE workshops as well as in her book, that more people are involved in the event of bullying than just the bully and the person at the receiving end. Bystanders make the incident publicly humiliating and support existing power relations even as they internalize the threat that if they do not act like the right kind of person—tough enough, rough enough, straight enough, masculine enough—they could draw this same kind of violence their way.

Of course, I cannot talk about all these things with Diedra; I have to choose something. I would be here all day, and besides, she does not want or need all my ideas. My purpose in this conference is just to give her a little more to think with, and I have a few possibilities from which to choose. In Lee Shulman’s early research on physicians, before he turned his attention to the practice of teaching, one of his key findings was that doctors do not hold in mind hundreds of possible diagnoses while they are interacting with a patient. Within a short time from a patient beginning to describe symptoms, they narrow to a handful of possible, more likely diagnoses, usually competing hypotheses, and they attempt to rule some of those out. Practitioners, both doctors and teachers, have to handle complexity not by exhausting every possibility, but by assembling a pool of possible responses from available resources, given imperfect knowledge and limited time and attention. My point here is that one of the chief wellsprings for that pool of possibilities is my professional community, the relationships I have made there and the ways of thinking and acting that are held by those relationships.

So far, this conference with Diedra has been pretty meandering, and if I just get up and leave now, I am not sure how it will help her as she keeps reading. My objective here has been to build up and complicate a concept that, when I first knelt beside her, was a little unstable, not quite as multifaceted as it might be. So I say, “Diedra, when I think back on what we have talked about over the last few minutes, I think these are some of the ideas you are getting about bullies. One is that someone is acting like they are the superior one. Let’s write that on this part of a page in your reader’s notebook and leave some space for you to make notes as you read. Another idea was that there is sometimes something about the person being bullied, maybe like being small but maybe also other things, that makes it seem to the bully like it is be OK to pick on them. And we also talked about how other people, besides just this bully and person getting picked on, are also involved.” I create a matrix with these ideas across the top. “So as you read this next story, you could just jot a couple of words in these boxes for each of those ideas, and that would keep you thinking about them as you read. Because when you are reading at your most powerful, you are thinking about the point of the story. With these stories here, your guess is that it
is about bullying. So let’s see how you can develop these interesting ideas about bullying. It will be great to see what you come up with.”

The Accountability of a Professional Community

Diedra dives right in and makes a few notes before settling back into reading. I make some notes in my notebook about what we just talked about, the notes I will later use to write this article. I make the notes for several reasons, but one is because I talk about my work at NCTE’s Annual Convention. I believe that one thing that helps me keep attending to quality in what I do with students is the pressure to talk about it with a professional community. That, to me, is accountability, the expectation that I can give an account of what I decide to do, one that will make good sense to others in my professional sphere. I do not make many pedagogical moves—as a teacher of kids, of teachers, or of college students—without thinking about that kind of accountability, a much more rigorous meaning of that word than the false definition in so much contemporary policy, the blame-game of consequences around testing. I think that teachers must be accountable, and this is what I mean by it. I do not think that teachers should have autonomy—and this sense of connection, influence, and accountability is what I mean by that, too. We are not autonomous; we are ultimately more powerful than that, because we are part of a profession.

It is perpetually outrageous and delightful to me that the first sentence of the first issue of English Journal was “No” (Hopkins 1). One would not begin the first article in a new journal for English teachers like that without a pretty strong sense of purpose. Hopkins was answering the question in his title: Can good composition teaching be done under present conditions? His “No,” then, was an affirmation as much as it was a rejection. He was affirming that good literacy teaching required some time to talk with individuals, to get down into words and worlds with them, to respond to their first thoughts with questions that might lead to further thinking. I do not want to project anachronistic positions onto Hopkins, and I understand he might not have had in mind conferences like the one I have been describing. Nevertheless, I do think he was saying that a teacher’s attention is a limited resource and that it has to be stewarded carefully in order to provide adequate intellectual support to individual students. Hopkins was, further, demonstrating to us, his students, that we, through our professional organization, would need to take collective stands on policy and conditions so as to preserve an individual teacher’s ability to have conversations like this one. These moments with students may seem private, the kinds of things good teachers accomplish when they “shut the door.” But they are moments protected (or intruded upon) and fed (or drowned out) by forces that might seem distant from a particular teacher’s steps through a classroom. They depend upon a host of public, shared, collective conditions that we mutually create—and preserve—for one another.

I believe that one thing that helps me keep attending to quality in what I do with students is the pressure to talk about it with a professional community. That, to me, is accountability.

Works Cited


What Makes a Teaching Moment: Spheres of Influence in Professional Activity


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**NCTE 80 YEARS AGO**

From the November 27, 1931, Minutes, Annual Business Meeting of Members, 1931 Annual Convention, Banquet Room, Hotel Schroeder:

The annual report of the secretary showed that in April, 1931 the membership of the Council was larger than ever before. Membership renewals and the enrollment of new members during the fall of 1931 ran about eight per cent below the corresponding figures for 1930. The new list of Books for Home Reading had been distributed to the number of about 150,000, of which something like 7,500 were free copies given to old and new members. Copy for the new Leisure Reading (grades 7–9) was in the hands of printers who were bidding upon its production. The Leonard monograph, probably to be called *Current Practices in Usage and Punctuation* was complete, and only in need of a little editing, ready for printing whenever the money shall be available. (10)

TS. University of Illinois Archives (Record Series 15/70/01, Box 1, File 1), Urbana, IL.