From the Editors

Teaching is not a purely technical act. We have all worked with students who are defiant or apathetic in our class, but are earnest and engaged in a colleague’s class. We have all experienced groups of learners who energize and delight us as well as groups that are, perhaps, less inspiring. The curriculum is consistent, our identities are constant; what explains these variations?

Teaching cannot be reduced to a replicable set of algorithms. Teachers understand that these variations can be explained by the humans who populate, inhabit, and shape our learning environments. “First days” of new classes are exciting (and a little bit scary) precisely because we can’t predict what our courses will be like until we meet the people with whom we will cultivate our shared spaces. Authentic teaching and learning occur at the intersection of teacher, student, and content; the texts we co-construct reflect who we are individually, who we are together, and who we hope to become.

Meaningful teaching involves relationships. Teachers realize that who our students are affects how they learn. Who they are influences how they have experienced school, how they think about themselves as learners, and how they interact with texts. Consequently, knowing students, which can only happen by forging relationships built on genuine interest, is an essential aspect of meaningful teaching. Moreover, an absence of focus on knowing and caring about who our learners are is a significant omission that affects how students interact with us, with each other, and with the content we seek to teach.

Classroom cultures, and school cultures, shape and are shaped by relationships. Relationships are central to teaching and learning, and since schools are built for the purpose of learning, relationships are a fundamental component of schools. Teaching is an intensely human undertaking, yet teachers often feel isolated and drained by the everyday work of negotiating often-competing needs of young people, colleagues, administrators, parents, community members, and policymakers. As colleagues, we must support one another, nurture one another, and urge one another to improve our practice. Teachers must organize and act on our common goals, our common purposes, and not allow our professional communities to be fractured by ratings and rankings that might pit us against one another. We owe it to our learners to be transparent, act with integrity, and model collegiality amid dissension.

In this issue, we explore the multifaceted ways that relationships are fundamental to the work of teaching. Authors consider how relationships with students inspire learning, invigorate texts, and enhance professional practice. They reflect on the importance of establishing connections with fellow educators, as well as the communities beyond classroom doors and school walls. Articles and columns contemplate how policies that privilege particular forms of data seep into classroom interactions and change the ways we associate with one another.

In this age of increasing standardization, it is important to remember that what brought most of us to the English classrooms we lead was love: love for literature, love for language, love for teaching, love for learning, and love for young people. We hope this issue will inspire you to revitalize that love and to strengthen the network of relationships so critical to our craft.

Former secondary English teachers, Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski are authors of Making It Real: Case Stories for Secondary Teachers (Sense, 2012) and, with Thomas Ramming, Theory into Practice: Case Stories for School Leaders (Sense, 2016).