Steal like a Teacher: NCTE and Professional Growth

A couple of years ago, newspaper poetry blackout artist, Austin Kleon, presented “Steal Like an Artist,” his secret to creativity. Kleon is not promoting stealing in the form of plagiarism; instead, he advocates “steal[ing] the thinking behind the style”; in other words, “You don’t want to look like your heroes, you want to see like your heroes” (36). To help his audience understand what to steal, Kleon provides a chart of “Good Theft vs. Bad Theft,” guiding his readers down the path to the best kind of stealing (39). Fittingly, the quotes he steals to support his message are probably the best part. For example, Kleon quotes cartoonist Gary Panter as saying, “If you have one person you’re influenced by, everyone will say you’re the next whoever. But if you rip off a hundred people, everyone will say you’re so original!” (36).

No one has to give this advice to English teachers. We are pros at stealing lesson plans, and we know to give credit. We also tweak the lesson so that it works for our students (not just stealing the activity, but the idea behind the activity). This type of stealing pulls out the best ideas and synthesizes our ingenuity until we have something worthy, something original, something we can claim as our own. Ultimately, we want our students to engage in this process as well.

Our most creative and worthy moments in the classroom are often products of “Good Theft.” Good theft happens when we “honor, study, steal from many, credit, transform, remix” (Kleon 39). These good theft moments become a model for good work, and our students who witness our good theft might even value our efforts enough to begin this worthy journey themselves.

NCTE: A Great Place to Steal like a Teacher

Joining the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) begins a journey to frame ourselves as professionals who seek discourses devoted to the spirit of language and literacy teaching:

The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language. (“NCTE”)

NCTE membership provides opportunities for conversations to extend our thinking and push us beyond what is easily accessible in our everyday professional lives. This journey requires effort, but the more we seek, the more we will gain access to a comprehensive gathering of ideas.

The hard part of being an active member is maintaining involvement in the professional conversations at the heart of our organization. NCTE has links on its website to assist these efforts, but the most significant influence on our practices involves attending NCTE’s Annual Convention.

This is an homage to how our involvement has shaped us as educators. Dan and I met while attending our first NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia in 2009. We came from two different states and two different grade levels, but the two of us have been sharing, listening, collaborating, writing together, and stealing from one another for the past six years. This type of professional collaboration reaches deep into our classrooms as we model these behaviors for our students, hoping to encourage them to collaborate in similar ways.
Below we share a written dialogue about how the Annual Convention has enabled us to become expert teacher thieves.

**Tara:** I recently revisited my notes from our first NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia. I listened to three keynote authors—Junot Díaz, Julie Andrews, and Joyce Carol Oates—and attended sessions on visual literacy, image analysis, poetry analysis, and literary criticism. I was able to hear the voices of educators whose books and advice I have read and adapted, such as Carol Jago, Kelly Gallagher, and Jim Burke. I attended Secondary Section events, meeting other educators who have become extraordinary resources, some from my home state. Then I met Dan at High School Matters, where we volunteered to blog for the Secondary Section at http://nctesecondary.blogspot.com.

**Dan:** The first time I received my NCTE membership card in the mail was like a milestone birthday: I’d been given an extraordinary gift, given permission to do things I had not done before, and I wondered how my new status would affect my life the next day. I woke up the next day feeling a definite sense of underwhelming regularity. I mean, where was my sudden superpowered ability to teach English like a seasoned professional? Where was my sudden desire to consume critical scholarship on the ins and outs of the English classroom? I was still just me, waking up in my bed, a day older, a membership card more encumbered, and a tax break more fortunate.

Luckily, a month later I attended the Annual Convention in Philadelphia. Conventions are funny things; they are meetings, intended to bring people together, that often occur in places so large they inspire a sense of marginalization and isolation. You see people crowded together, some catching up with old friends, others talking with people whose books adorn your professional bookshelves. You feel so far apart that the gaps seem insurmountable. I remember wandering through the enormous spread of sessions and exhibits in the Philadelphia Convention Center, identifying authors who had been my unofficial professors; after all, like a number of my colleagues, I had earned my license through an alternative route. According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI), as of 2005, 47 states offered 122 alternative routes to licensure offered by 619 providers of individual programs. Up until the Annual Convention, I had let my unfamiliarity and inexperience alienate me from these experts. It was not until the second day, sitting at a table in a large ballroom with Tara Seale, the type of role model closet extroverts like myself need, that I finally let myself get involved: I volunteered to write the High School Matters blog with her.

That outlet gave me a place to voice my opinions and share my thoughts on the profession. I occasionally heard back from a reader about how something I wrote had influenced his or her thinking. I began to grow, get bolder, and developed the confidence to follow through. I became a professional.

**Tara:** I knew I had discovered the place for English teacher stealing. At the next Annual Convention, I was inspired by this teacher sharing to present with a colleague, and then I ran for a position on the Secondary Section Steering Committee. As a member of the committee, I support the needs of NCTE members, plan events at Convention, speak and present at Convention, submit articles to *English Journal*, and review Annual Convention proposals, among many other forms of participation. All of these valuable experiences are similar to what we ask our students to do in our classrooms: be classroom leaders, have a voice in discussions, present in front of their peers, share their writing with their peers, evaluate the products produced by their peers, publish their writing, and, most of all, participate in the classroom conversation.

**Dan:** Participation in NCTE is where the rubber falls off the tires, the car sprouts wings, and we leave the road behind. Teaching is about daring, about soaring high as an example to others of what can be accomplished when the intellect of a scholar meets the impossible limitlessness of a child’s imagination. Without the community of support I have developed through both NCTE and the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE), I would not be the teacher I am today. In fact, the influence
Dan: Before NCTE, everything I knew about reading instruction came from Deeper Reading. That book turned me from a guy with a passion for reading into a guy who could communicate the value of that passion. The book showed me the value of learning from another practicing teacher who stays in touch with the research community. These connections exemplify what NCTE does; it challenges us to become the best we can by putting us in community with one another.

Admittedly, it took six years to start feeling the difference, but I’ve heard many people say that it takes about five years to see the effects of a new decade, too. Don’t feel 30 yet; wait until 35. Though I have come a long way, the richness of my relationship with my NCTE community has helped me grow in empowering directions, and will continue to help me grow and lead.

Our students and colleagues know we are members of NCTE (some Fridays, Tara wears her geeky NCTE shirt or dons her NCTE lapel pin), and they know why we think it makes us better teachers. They also know we will leave every November for a couple of days to attend the Annual Convention, but we will come back reinvigorated with new ideas and strategies to implement into our classrooms. Stealing from NCTE empowers us to communicate with passion and influence about the profession we love.

Tara: Readers of this article are most likely members of NCTE and also English Journal subscribers. Yet, you may have colleagues who you wish would join NCTE and participate in the broader conversation, or maybe you want to become more involved or attend a convention. I want to end with one last reason to join the NCTE conversation by quoting something I wrote in a Arkansas Humanities Council grant, which helped fund my NCTE Annual Convention experience:

If I am not communicating and learning from other educators beyond my own school district or region, I risk becoming provincial and narrow in my thinking. . . . It is important that I attend the NCTE national convention to challenge my preconceptions about what works in the classroom so that I can remain fresh and current not only for my students, but also for the teachers I mentor in my district and state.

Works Cited


Tara Seale teaches AP Language and Composition at Bryant High School in Bryant, Arkansas. She serves as the assistant chair on the NCTE Secondary Section Committee, and she has blogged for the Secondary Section at the High School Matters Blog. Dan Bruno has taught remedial-level students through AP-level students in both language and literature. He currently teaches at Springfield Township High School in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania. He serves on the NCTE Secondary Section Nominating Committee. Find more from Dan at the High School Matters Blog (http://nctesecondary.blogspot.com).