English class exists, as it always has, within the territory of an unjust world. And, while there are stellar exceptions, English class has often served that unjust world fairly well. English class, in the past and in our own twenty-first-century democracy, has often been used to advance political and cultural ends, not all of which are benevolent. Flying under the flag of correctness, assimilation, even intelligibility, instruction regarding regulation of accent, vocabulary, and syntax has had mixed results. Such instruction has ensured that many leave English class confirmed regarding their superiority and their rightful place in the world. In response to that same instruction, many leave English class convinced of their inferiority and lack of fit in the wider society. In English class, privileging an unquestioned canon of literature can narrow the known world to the safety of the acceptably mainstream. Restricting discussion and writing topics to the confines of predictable societal norms can gut the classroom of disruptive or creative thinking. To maintain the norm, to keep the peace, heretical texts and heretical ideas must be repressed and excluded.

This is often no one’s heinous and horrid fault: it is the way of the herd, how society ensures that all stay clustered in the group, no stragglers, no outsiders. It is also how we ensure the herd survives, how we transmit and carry on. In school, in English class, we teachers are vulnerable to this kind of pressure, and, for a variety of reasons, some of us cooperate with it. And some of us don’t.

Many teachers, all over this country, every day, know that English class can also be more, and the opportunity to make it more, to open it up, comes at its intersection with our discipline’s content and its potent language subtext, the power to call out, to label, to accurately and fairly name.

To name is power. In many creation stories, the deity gives new humans the power to name. The animals and the natural features are then, duly, labeled and proclaimed: *This is an elephant, this is a cactus, this is a river*. In literature, from the contemporary to the ancient, the protagonist’s name is also essential. In numerous epics, the hero’s name is often hidden until an appropriately dramatic time. In the classics we teach in English, Homer’s Odysseus comes home and disguises his name; Arthur Miller’s John Proctor fights to defend his. Shakespeare’s Juliet wonders if she and Romeo can avoid deadly consequences if only he were called by a different name; in service of his own evil designs, Iago twists the meaning of a “good” name. Sandra Cisneros’s Esperanza meditates on the importance of her name and yearns for others to pronounce it correctly. James Baldwin thunders that *nobody knows my name*.

What do we name in English class? Countless things.

We may start with full and just and accurate names for groups. And we explore with our students why we even engage in this discussion. Is it *Indian, Native American, American Indian, or Indigenous? Should a specific person always be referred to by her tribe, for instance, Lakota Sioux? How does this naming change and evolve, and why? Is it *colored, Negro, black, African American, person of color* (and what is the place of the powerful and toxic *n* word)? Why? *Latino or Hispanic? Does it make a difference? To extend this beyond race and ethnic identity: Is it *disabled or a person with disabilities? A slave or a person who is enslaved? Is it Miss or Mrs. or Ms.? Or Mx.? Is it a girl or girl or young woman? (What about *bitch and ho*?) Do I wish that you not call me *he or she*, but *they*? Do I wrest away the scorn of a term and proclaim that I am *queer, not lesbian, not homosexual, not gay? What do you assume about me if you call...*
me Gen X or Gen Y or a Millennial? And it extends to the political: Is it civil disobedience or insurrection? Murder or ethnic cleansing? Torture or enhanced interrogation? Patriotism or terrorism? Does it matter whether we call it global warming or climate change? Is it a fact or a fake fact or an alternative fact or just an outright lie? In the end, does it make any difference?

In the end, it really, really does make a difference. How we and our beliefs are named by others—which then affects how we view ourselves and our actions—is crucial. How we and what we believe is named by ourselves can empower us and guide our actions. Often there is a gap, a tension, between how others name us and how we name us, and attention to this gap is essential. George Orwell explores the issue with devastating conclusions in his essay “Politics and the English Language” and maintains that when we accept names that are perversions, that are blatant tools of corrupted power, we have subverted reality, we have subverted justice. When we name and insist that that term is the just and accurate one, we uphold our own sense of self and identity. When we name we control, in certain ways, our own reality, and we invite others to share it.

The National Council of Teachers of English has, for more than 100 years, been a place and clearinghouse for the responsible use of language and its enlistment in the battle for equity and justice. NCTE honors teachers and classrooms where language exploration and honest language use are practiced on a daily basis; it calls out doublespeak and supports intellectual freedom. Its great body of resolutions demands that names be fair, be accurate. Over the century of its existence, NCTE has addressed issues of social justice, gender and race, war and peace, intellectual freedom for students and teachers, fair assessment of students, and the use of gender-fair language (Christenbury). NCTE’s books and journals and the committed teachers who edit and contribute to them continuously challenge us to provide in our classes a space for us and our students to explore—and adhere to—the ever-changing landscape of just and accurate names.

The search for equity and fairness is a never-ending one, and while we take heart from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s belief that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” it is indeed a long and continual endeavor, and it is enacted all over this country in English classes every day. For us, as conscientious teachers, it is our honor and privilege to explore with our students the just and accurate names, the language that does not obfuscate but which illuminates and proclaims, confidently and boldly, this is what it really is. This is the true name.

WORKS CITED

LEILA CHRISTENBURY is a past president of NCTE and a past editor of English Journal. Her latest book (with Ken Lindblom) is Continuing the Journey: Becoming a Better Teacher of Literature and Informational Texts (NCTE).