Traveling toward Hope in the ELA Classroom

Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts

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As English language arts (ELA) teachers and teacher educators, we are continuously on a quest to find hope in our teaching practices, curriculum, and collegial encounters. We seek resources that can give us energy during the hard work we undertake and in the wake of criticism we sometimes face; we look for inspiration to persist when obstacles present; and we search for pathways to achieving successful teaching moments for and with our students. In the fourth edition of Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts—by Leila Christenbury and Ken Lindblom, two veteran English educators and former ELA teachers with decades of experience—we find these sources of agency woven through the pages.

The book combines narrative forms and expository explanations of effective instructional approaches future and practicing ELA teachers can integrate immediately in their own classrooms. In these pages, personal narratives support us in our teaching endeavors as they feature specific classroom experiences the authors share. The expository details throughout the text provide us with strategies for teaching ELA skills to secondary students in meaningful ways, and woven throughout the multifaceted classroom suggestions are prompts that ask teachers to integrate their voices and consider the adaptation of such strategies with students in their own classroom contexts. As an English educator, I have found this text to be an invaluable resource for the preservice and inservice teachers I work with each semester. It builds on prior knowledge in the field, addresses common concerns teachers may have when beginning or continuing their careers, promises support for all of us in search of encouragement when teaching is challenging, and urges the examination of current and/or effective instructional practices to adjust and (re)imagine various approaches to working with students in ELA classrooms.

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As teachers, we need the reliable support of colleagues who have stood in our shoes, walked alongside secondary school students and colleagues, and tried, failed, and tried again to experience authentic learning moments in the classroom with their own students. Christenbury and Lindblom are precisely the supportive colleagues we are on continuous journeys to find. My students and I find encouragement in their words and their work. We look to them for mentorship and advice.
that can be consistently found across the ten chapters of research-based and classroom-tested strategies they share.

To establish collegial connection and build community with readers, the first chapters of the book start with an inviting feature: stories written by the authors. Both “Ken’s Story” and “Leila’s Story” are headings that start Chapters 1 through 3 (and are included in many subsequent chapters), and these sections allow readers to see that the authors have stood where we stand—with personal motivations for entering the profession and with many of the same worries, challenges, and questions we face. In addition to personal narratives that readers can count on in this book to provide the collegial care needed to find hope in sometimes challenging times as educators, the strategies in each chapter offer teachers an abundant tool box to explore, adopt, experiment with, and adapt in our own teaching styles and learning communities. To enhance the approaches suggested, each chapter ends with a comprehensive list of resources, and readers can follow these citations to additional explanations of each technique.

Other structural features of this edition of the book that ELA teachers can count on to make the advice relevant are the “Tech Talk” and “For Your Journal” boxes found throughout the chapters. Because technology can significantly increase our connections to our colleagues, students, and other audiences, learning new pathways to engage in the work of teaching English through technology is a worthwhile endeavor. For example, in the chapter “The World of Literature: Teaching and Selecting,” the “Tech Talk” extensions include ReadWriteThink’s “Literary Elements Map” tool, which can help struggling readers to “create very clear graphic organizers” and assist in their understandings of the complex works of literature they engage with (176). Another extension, the website Goodreads.com, provides an educational space “dedicated to book lovers of all kinds” and “allows participants [on the site] to track their own reading, follow the reading of their friends, and . . . read and write short reviews of any book” (185). These tech tools—and the many others provided throughout the text—give ELA teachers the means to connect their students to authentic reading and writing experiences that build relevance into their classrooms.

Further, the “For Your Journal” feature gives teachers the space to examine their own voices within the larger context of ELA teacher and teacher educator communities. Each journal prompt asks readers to consider the concepts discussed in the chapters in ways that honor their own teaching styles and contexts, reinforcing the idea that though many specific approaches are suggested, adaptation of the strategies is encouraged given the unique talents of teachers and their students. As teachers, when we search for ways of putting our individual voices into our classrooms, these prompts provide support and reassurance. Consider one prompt in the chapter “Words, Words, Words,” for example: “Do any of the concepts above challenge your views of the way you have been taught to think about language? In your journal, write specific statements that you find of concern or in some conflict with your education” (259). The prompt continues by encouraging readers to further investigate what we will need to know to resolve these conflicts so that we can “engage [our] future students in language instruction that is research-based and that aligns with [this] thinking” (259). By inciting us to examine the gap between what we believe works best with students and what others suggest works best with students, the book encourages us to think critically about the ways we work with learners.

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When we are mindful of a gap in practical understandings, then we can turn to resources such as Making the Journey to help us navigate a path that aids us in finding the motivation and the strategies to achieve personally defined successes in the ELA classroom.
In their willingness to share their teaching journeys and classroom experiences with us, the authors create a critical source of hope for us as ELA teachers. This book aims to do: to create a community of support that is genuinely hope-focused through the art of connecting strategies, theories, ideas, and people.

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GOING PUBLIC WITH ASSESSMENT
A Community Practice Approach

Kathryn Mitchell Pierce and Rosario Ordoñez-Jasis

When students, families, and the community are invited to be active, engaged participants in assessment discussions, all stakeholders have an opportunity to create a shared vision for literacy learning and to construct assessment tools and strategies that help everyone answer the important questions: “How are we engaging with one another over our literacy assessment beliefs and practices?” and “How can we better bring families and communities into these conversations?”

Veteran educators Kathryn Mitchell Pierce and Rosario Ordoñez-Jasis share classroom vignettes, strategies, and resources for “going public” with literacy assessment through teacher collaboration with colleagues, with families, and with the community. Drawing from the IRA–NCTE Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing, Revised Edition, and their own extensive experience, the authors have compiled a set of collaborative assessment principles, as well as a model for teacher professional development around assessment, to guide teachers from assessment theory to practical implementation in the classroom.

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Principles in Practice
Turning the Page on Literacy