I initially conceptualized this address as dealing with powerful English at NCTE today and tomorrow moving forward, and something felt not right in portraying ourselves in that way. It is unconscionable to think of ourselves as at the beginning of a movement, or at the beginning of the first movement in the history of NCTE. NCTE has been about movement, and to say that we have not is to dishonor the legacy of those who have come before us and worked so hard on our behalf. So I added a yesterday to today and tomorrow because I think that we don’t often reflect on who we are and what we have become to think about where we need to go. So it is not towards a movement, it is towards the next, or another, movement because that is who we are and what we do. Deborah Brandt (2010) in her foreword to Reading the Past, Writing the Future said:

What we take for granted in our professional background is there as a result of somebody’s insight and effort. In retrospect, we appreciate how the activism of forebears built the house in which we do our work today: Reading as constructive. Writing as process. Language as a heritage right. Assessment as formative. Teachers as leaders. Scholarship and pedagogy as one. We assume these truths to be self-evident, but only because NCTE members studied, taught, argued, and presented them into existence, making them programmatically real to the wider field. So this begs the question: Whose forebears are we? What do they need from us now? (p. xii)

NCTE and Its Movements
Let’s begin at the beginning of NCTE and movements. In its third year as an organization, NCTE released the report of the Committee on Home Reading (NCTE, 1913), which sold 400,000 copies. At that time, NCTE members were concerned with the undue influence that the College Board had on the selection of read-
ing texts. Even then, in 1913, NCTE members were arguing for the need to read different books. So much so that they basically neutralized the influence of the College Board and began exploding the cannon over 100 years ago. We see that work continue with the NCTE Black Caucus, who initiated the African American Read-In to encourage a greater appreciation of African American literature.

In the 1940s, NCTE stepped out front to think about teaching in a context of war, a context not unlike today, almost 80 years later. Even then our predecessors were contemplating, “How do we talk about freedom? How do we talk about peace? How do we talk about democracy in a time of war, and what is the role of the English teacher in that process? How can we think that teaching English is not a political act?”

In the 1960s, NCTE was far out front in thinking about teaching English to speakers of other languages. We are having this conversation again now, in 2014, as if we all of a sudden have become a multilingual nation. We have been a multilingual nation since we became a nation—people were speaking languages other than English when the British colonists arrived! But NCTE was on top of this issue even in the 1960s.

It is important to acknowledge the wonderful work that ReLeah Lent and her colleagues on the Standing Committee Against Censorship are doing now in 2014. But we should also acknowledge that NCTE has anti-censorship challenges going back to the 1960s. I love the note below because it sums up so much of what I think is a part of NCTE. You can read it. It is a letter written to the director of publications in 1963 about fighting the good fight against the censorship of *Catcher in the Rye*, and the part I love says, “Alas, it was to no avail.” This fight did not succeed, but NCTE was still fighting, and that was over 50 years ago. We are still fighting that fight.

![Letter from 1963 about fighting censorship](image)

*NCTE has been fighting censorship for over 50 years.*
Anti-racism: NCTE has been fighting against racism in curriculum in American education since the 1970s. In combing the NCTE archives in preparation for this talk I came across several articles in local papers speaking to NCTE’s antiracism work. One publication identified NCTE in 1970 as establishing a task force to combat racism and bias in textbooks. Another, reporting from our 60th annual convention, quotes members who questioned the absence of Native American stories in the canon of American literature.

The teaching of writing: In the 1960s NCTE co-sponsored the Dartmouth Conference on the teaching of English with the National Association of Teachers of English of the United Kingdom. Dartmouth College in New Hampshire really radicalized the profession and began to help us think about writing as a process and the amazing work that some of my predecessors as NCTE presidents have pursued.

We have also been out in front making an argument for the teaching of diverse books. I love how NCTE President-elect and Program Chair Kathy Short has the inclusion of diverse stories as a theme of this Convention. It is important for us to remember that Charlemae Rollins was focused on this back in 1941 in an NCTE publication entitled *We Build Together: A Reader’s Guide to Negro Life and Literature*, and Rudine Sims Bishop has been talking about it since the early 1980s with her NCTE publication *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982).

We have had many movements, and our current generation of NCTE members stands on the shoulders of others who have come before us. As NCTE president I stand on the shoulders of shoulders of shoulders of NCTE warrior poets who have fought for our children, who have fought for our discipline, who know that literacy is not only a civil right but also the key to our humanity.

I would like to acknowledge several of our past presidents who have been my predecessors in this work: Janet Emig, who has led us in exploring writing as a process, and writing and thinking and learning as intertwined. Yetta Goodman, who has taken us into the wonderful, rich linguistic and cultural world of elementary school children and tells us that we cannot have a humane classroom until we honor those worlds in the classroom space. There should not be a divide between the classroom and the community. Anne Gere and her powerful scholarship on writing theory, composition, writing groups, and looking at how composing is a communal process that happens not only in the academy but also in other spaces such as living rooms and kitchen tables. I am also indebted to Sheridan Blau and his important work on the literature workshop that helps us think about how we bring texts to life for students in our classrooms. Text itself is only a part of that transaction, and the teacher needs to be another important part. Kylene Beers and her amazing work helping struggling readers and thinking about our responsibility as teachers and helping to cultivate these reading identities. Kathi Yancey and her thought-provoking work on portfolios as assessments, moving us beyond thinking about traditional notions of assessment and even encouraging us to think more deeply about assessing writing in the digital age. Carol Jago and her work on the teaching of literature, helping a nation of teachers to think about bringing authors
like Sandra Cisneros into the classroom. My partner in crime on the presidential
team, Keith Gilyard, who is a discipline unto himself with his path-breaking work
honoring African American language and literature while staying true to the lan-
guage game (Gilyard, 2011).

**Powerful English Today and Tomorrow**

How do we build upon the amazing work that has come before? I love this question
of Brandt’s. Whose forebears are we? What do we need to risk on our own today
to make possible 50 years from now a movement for powerful English? Because
that is our responsibility. I like to think of beginning with, who are we? When do
we begin to recognize, as a discipline and as a field, that we are a multiliterate,
multilingual America, and that you cannot extricate the political enterprise from
the teaching of English? If you are not for social justice then you are for social
injustice. There is no in-between.

What does it mean for us to be a multilingual, multiliterate discipline focused
on social justice? This is our American landscape, according to the Council of
Great City Schools (2012), which profiles the 60 largest districts in America: 38%
of those students in our Great City schools are Latino, 33% are African American,
20% are white, 7% are Asian American/Pacific Islander, 69% qualify for free and
reduced lunch, which is measured by a family living within a percentage of the
federal poverty line. We think about that and often talk about it as urban education.

I just want to highlight some numbers from the Council of Great City Schools
data: only 28% of African American students attend a so-called urban school in
a high-needs central city district; 72% of them do not. Only 24% of Latino stu-
dents attend schools in those districts; 76% do not. So this is a national issue. Our
multicultural America is in your classrooms no matter where you are. So in that
light, I would like to think about some of the key questions that we need to ask
as a discipline in order to be able to move forward and address this multicultural
America, not as a challenge but as our strength. Diversity is not the challenge. The
challenge is our unwillingness to embrace diversity. Diversity is not a problem. The
problem is our unwillingness to embrace and love our diverse selves. Diversity is
our greatest strength! It is our greatest strength!

**Three Focal Questions**

Following are the three questions that have been the focus of my work, and that I
think have been the focus of our work as a field. I think about contextualizing this
movement as who is doing tomorrow today? Tomorrow is happening today in our
classrooms, so we don’t have to hypothesize about it. We can just point it out when
it happens. These three questions: How do we get students excited about learning?
Instead of asking the achievement question, I ask the excitement question. When
kids are talking over each other, hands raised, in the tiger crouch, and can’t wait
to speak, that is when we know they are excited about learning. That excitement
increases engagement, and engagement increases achievement.
The second question I think about—and scholars like Kylene Beers have been asking this question for years—is how do we develop students’ literate identities? Instead of a focus on reading, let’s think about readers. Instead of attention to writing, let’s think about writers. When I become a reader or writer, when I have that identity, you don’t have to tell me to go read. I am a reader, and that’s what readers do. When reading is something that is decoding, or done just for a test, then you have to drag students to it. How do we make readers and writers out of our students? And third, how do we make reading instruction socially, culturally, and technologically relevant?

I have to acknowledge my mother and father, who began their careers as public school educators in the late 1960s. They continue to teach today. There are many ideas about teaching that they have enculturated into me as I have followed in their footsteps. My mother says, “If you wait for Standards to go away, you will be waiting forever. If you wait for the end of the struggle before you think about teaching for social justice, you will be waiting forever. Standards, barriers to achievement, poverty, inequitable conditions in school are no excuses for you not loving those babies! And no excuse for you not teaching in a manner consistent with your values!”

Another thing that I have learned from my parents is that teaching is a privilege not an obligation. We have to embrace that. We embrace teaching as a privilege. My father said, “I will not let anyone take away my right to dream. As a teacher, I am a dreamer.” In his first retirement before he went back into teaching, he said, “I wanted to retire a dreamer, and I tell you today my dreams are as vivid about the future of this American landscape as they were when I started.”

English teaching needs to have as its focus the cultivating of youth voices. This is a change I think of as a part of doing tomorrow today. As opposed to English

Ernest and Katherine Morrell, the author’s parents, who have been teaching since the 1960s.
having voices of great literature imposed upon us, this is cultivating voices especially in this productive digital age. We know the students have something to say. They are motivated. What we do in this transaction in the classroom is help them know how to say it. Help them feel good about their ability to say it. Help them to say it with power and authority. Help them use their voices whether they are eight or eighteen or eighty to advocate for social change.

There are many great English educators who are doing that. I just want to give a shout to some of the members here at NCTE that are doing that kind of work: Valerie Kinloch, Mariana Souto-Manning, David Kirkland, Adam Banks, and Django Paris to name a few. There are many others like them who are talking about what it means to teach in a revolutionary, multicultural way that helps people to cultivate their voices and speak the truth in power.

We also have great work that is being done in our field on critical learning theories, demonstrating that learning happens when one is able to participate and engage and not be dictated to. Or as Paulo Freire describes, to have knowledge deposited into one’s head (Freire, 1970). We have wonderful scholars like Carol Lee and Kris Gutierrez who have helped us in this regard.

**Doing Tomorrow in Today’s Classrooms**

What I would like to do with the remainder of my time is talk about what tomorrow looks like today in some of these classrooms and share some stories that are certain to inspire. I think we have to begin with the premise—and get the word out—that excellent instruction is happening every day in American classrooms. If we want
to figure out what to do tomorrow, let’s look at what is excellent today instead of assuming that there is a problem. The problem is that we are not acknowledging the wonderful teaching that is happening in our classrooms.

**Developing Powerful Readers**

So what does this look like? I would like to start with this idea of developing powerful readers. I think about this in working with teachers, and the work that we do as centered around three questions. What do we read? How do we read? What do we do while and after we read? There is a political context within which these questions are continually asked and answered. For this reason we cannot separate a literacy agenda from a political one. The subject of the politics of literacy teaching and learning is at the core of this Convention. How we have decided what is good for students to read throughout history, and how we decide today is one such political question.

One of the people doing tomorrow today is Deborah Appleman. In her *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2009), she addresses the question of not just *what* we read but *how* we read in English classrooms. The children’s and young adult literature authors that participated in our Friday General Session also addressed this issue. Any text is an invitation to a critical conversation, and that becomes important. There is a multicultural reading possible of every text. There is a feminist reading possible of every text. There is an LGBTQ reading possible of every text. We don’t have to find those texts—those realities are in every text that we read. When are we going to allow kids to bring their world, their lived experiences, into their interactions with texts and say, this is how I see myself in and outside of this text? Deborah’s work does that.
Teri Lesesne (2010) has done remarkable work helping us, through her concept of reading ladders, to think differently about selecting the books that kids read. I have just seen the lights come on with teachers as they think about creating spaces for independent reading, creating topics that students are interested in, having a ladder that moves from books that are easier for students up to books that are more complicated. This is an example of a book ladder that we developed with teachers dealing with issues that are related to African American and Latino boys. *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas is where it starts, Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*, and then the ladder ends with W.E.B. DuBois’s *Darkwater*.

I have the privilege of learning from teachers who innovate by using Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1993) to engage in a post-colonial literary analysis of video games like Resident Evil 5, where the core of the plot involves shooting African “zombies” who have been infected with a parasite that has destroyed all rational thinking ability. Kids are playing these kinds of video games, and this teacher wants his students to gain an appreciation for literary theory by using it as a tool to make sense of popular culture. When our students look at the video game as a literary text, they begin to bring a critical lens to their own popular cultural participation.

**Critical Media Pedagogy**

The classes of tomorrow today are engaging in what I call a critical media pedagogy. In engaging critical media analysis, we ask these kinds of questions: We look at commercials and billboards and advertisements and Internet sites and ask: What
does it mean to be normal or cool? What does it mean to have power? What does it mean to be desired? Who is marginalized by others, or, as my kids say, what does it mean to be not cool? As an audience member, how are you targeted? What assumptions are made about you?

We have to understand that the corporate media, by its inundation of images that portray stereotypical and demeaning images of our young girls and boys, wages war on their bodies and minds. I tell people honestly, I have buried too many students over their inability to critically interpret these images. We bury too many of our students. This is a literacy that is a matter of life and death. Bill Kist urged us earlier, in his presentation of the ninth annual NCTE Media Literacy Award, not to consider critical media pedagogy as an add-on in our English classrooms. When our kids are bombarded with millions of corporate media images in their formative years, a critical discussion of media must become a central tenet of the new English. Educators who are bringing tomorrow’s English to life in classrooms today are engaging the media. They are not only creating more critical consumers of the media, but they are helping young people to become critical producers of the media.

I have to give another shout to the East Oakland Step to College program that has been directed by my partner in crime, Jeff Duncan-Andrade. We began teaching together in Oakland almost 25 years ago. This program (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) has amazing success! One of their projects is a “Doc Your Block” activity where the students create documentaries of life on their block, and kids become readers and
writers in the traditional mode as well as in the digital mode. A photograph on their website mentions all of the colleges these powerful young men and women are planning to attend. This is in East Oakland, my hometown. Universal college attendance has not traditionally been the norm, although it should be. What Jeff’s program shows is that if you have powerful English in your classrooms, it can be. The variable is not in the students themselves; the variable is in our ability to reach them.

Southern California fourth graders who live in a neighborhood that in twelve square blocks has a homicide rate that is 25% of the entire county come together and use Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985) to create poems and plays about their situation. What you see here are images from these young people, taught by my friend and colleague Laurence Tan, who are presenting to an audience of several hundred people in a model of theater where they are interacting with the audience and talking about violence and the solutions to violence. These kids not only do well as poets and playwrights, but they begin to perform well on their standardized exams. I have watched these kids come through. The first generation are now college students, and they have gone through programs that I have had the privilege of directing. These kids become playwrights as ways to talk about the issues in their community. That is the new English. That is teaching tomorrow’s English today.

**Developing Critical Writers**

I’d like to begin this section with a discussion of Maisha Fisher’s (now Maisha Winn’s) work on using poetry to develop students as critical writers through the ethnographic investigation of a poetry community in Brooklyn, New York. I have seen the students from *Writing in Rhythm* (Fisher, 2007), and they have actually...
presented here at NCTE with some of my students. They give testament to how poetry changes their lives.

Teachers I have worked with are emphatic about making spaces in English classrooms for the creation of critical poems. What does that mean to create a critical poem? Students say a critical poem is about changing the world. I was in this class where two freshmen were having a conversation about whether a poem changes the world. One said, “Can a poem really change the world?” The other student looked at her and said, “Well, I know for sure that the poem changes the poet who changes the world.” For 15-year-olds to be having that conversation . . . why aren’t we teaching poetry? What do we have against poetry? For those of us who are fond of that genre, we know that it does most to facilitate the development of powerful writers.

We see the critical language pedagogy happening in powerful ways; another example of tomorrow’s English(es) today. We are indebted to scholars like Elaine Richardson (2002) for her studies of African American literacies, and Damián Baca for his exploration of Mestiz@ scripts (Baca, 2008). These innovative and courageous scholars are multilingualizing the discourses of rhetoric and the teaching of English and thinking about what that means to encounter the texts and utterances of our students and their families on a humane level. Other dynamic critical language scholars include Geneva Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, H. Sammy Alim in his Global Linguistic Flows (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2009), and GloríAnzaldúa, most widely known for her multilingual text Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (Anzaldúa, 2012).

There is no reason that an English class cannot be a multilingual class when we have multilingual students. We have to exhibit courageous leadership to make this happen, in our current age of linguistic racism. I applaud the English educators who are making that tomorrow possible today. Cati de los Ríos, a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, has a project where she is looking at Raza studies in high school English—what that means to bring in diverse literatures, what that means to have students thinking about themselves becoming advocates as a way of teaching in an English class—and producing powerful readers and writers.

So, how do we develop students as writers? One of the things that I have seen is connecting the act of writing to the act of communicating—that we might call righteous indignation. I, for one, do not believe that we have to cultivate that righteous indignation. Students see a world around them filled with injustice and inequity. What we need to do as educators is simply allow the space for the authentic sharing of these stories as we help students to learn the art of telling their stories more powerfully. We should be asking our students, “What are the things that matter to you? What are the things that you love?” We should not have a problem with our students searching for things to write about because they have so many experiences in their world that are important to them that they want to share, and can share, and need to share, and are begging to share. When writing becomes that process, it becomes more real.

In one of the projects that I directed for many years for high school students, we started with these two questions: If you could change the world, what is one
thing you would do? If you could change your community, what is one thing you
would change?

We started this process of identifying a problem, developing a question, de-
signing a study, collecting and analyzing data, making claims, providing evidence, creating products, disseminating those products, and taking social action. We de-
veloped all sorts of workshops and activities to help students with that. It continues
to be an amazing project where students create PowerPoint presentations, research
briefs, memoirs, blogs; they tweet, write letters to mayors and senators, and create
documentaries. They also become very successful secondary and post-secondary
students in that process. They make all sorts of political impact changing policies
at school. Some of the work that they have done has become bills that have been
presented on the floors at state assemblies. As Jabari Mahiri was alluding to in the
introduction, they have become presenters to preservice and practicing teachers.

I first learned of the auto-ethnography project through Patrick Camangian
(2010), who is a professor at USF and also a teacher in the Step to College program
in East Oakland. Prior to that, he was an English teacher in South Central Los
Angeles. Drawing upon the work of Camangian and others, we began to develop
this project having students think about moving from Myself to My Community
to My World as an entree curriculum for ninth graders coming in to a particular
school in New Jersey where I was working at the time. The Myself section began
with narrative genres such as short stories, poems, and plays and culminated by
encouraging students to explore their own identities through writing their own
narratives and scripts. We then moved to My Community, where we mixed in
nonfiction texts such as news articles and research reports. Writing in this section
focused on writing up interviews with family and community members and public
officials. The final phase of this work would focus on My World, connecting these
local narratives to quantitative databases, as sociologists of urban education would
do. In this way, the students also connected work they began in English to the dis-
cipline of mathematics. In this vein, they wrote research reports that incorporated
their quantitative analyses. One of the conversations that I remember started with
the question, “How come so many people like me are dying on my block?” That
semester ended with students talking about post-industrialism and the joblessness
in the city and what kind of change we needed to make to eradicate the structural
causes of violence and crime. These young students connected their stories to the
larger post-industrial reality. That became one entree into literature and writing
and becoming an intellectual. You don’t need to tell that kind of kid to read. They
see how reading is important and part of revision and part of understanding the
world that I need to change and engage with at a fundamental level.

Another project, “A Day in My Life,” targeted students that were in danger of
dropping out of school. In the interest of increasing engagement and relevance,
their teacher began by asking them to take us through a day in their life. We fol-
lowed a set of prompts that we have used many times with kids as a springboard to
developing critical memoirs: What do you see when you wake up in the morning?
What do you eat? What do you see on the way to school? What happens when you
get to school? What does life look like for you after school? The students, ninth graders, wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote. One of them said, no one has ever asked me about a day in my life in school. These students wrote essays and created digital essays to go along with them. They also came to the university and presented their essays as well as their accompanying digital photo essays.

**Students as Oral Historians**
I have been able to work with teachers to create projects where students become oral historians, connecting their lives to the lives of others. One such project emerged from a ninth-grade class reading the Rudolfo Anaya novel *Bless Me, Ultima*. The story concerns a young person who is conflicted between cultures: city and rural, Mexico and America. A lot of our students have found themselves conflicted between these cultures. So as part of reading the text, we had students conduct interviews with elders in their communities. They wrote up these oral histories as essays and presented them along with PowerPoint slides they created. If a novel has a historical element, having the students become historians in their neighborhoods and communities and do an oral history is a way of getting them into the text.

I’d like to share an example of how we connect the reading of literature to critical research at an elementary level to this writing enterprise. A third-grade class participated in a Youth Summit where we asked all participants to reflect on the anniversary of the *Brown* decision, and to comment on whether or not we have more fair and equitable schools today than we have had. This particular class started their research project by reading *Ruby Bridges*. This is an actual quote from a third-grade student; these are her words that I am sharing with you:

> Back in the days before we were born, white people were mean to other people that did not look like them. They would treat them badly. They were different, and that was not right.

The students began using the story of Ruby Bridges to do a research project about their own school to determine whether or not their school was as well resourced as other schools that were in neighborhoods with higher median household incomes, and whether it is actually a fair and just thing in a society like America to have that discrepancy. This is a letter to Mr. H., the area superintendent:

> This letter is about our school. We are studying a unit named Imagination Open Court. We want to make our school a better place. We do not have enough school supplies. Our restrooms are dirty. Our school lunch is nasty. We don’t have enough paper. We don’t have enough work either. [She is talking about classroom work.] . . . We interviewed kids in the third grade. They said they did not like the some of the things in the school and some of them they did.

This third-grade student talked about their research process. She also talked about the oral history that they conducted in asking people what it was like to be bussed and what it was like to be at their school. This thoughtful statement I love, because
only third graders could say something like, “Our school lunch is nasty and we don’t have enough paper!” It is funny! What an indictment though, right? They are so honest. They don’t know how to be anything but blunt, but they had good teachers who encouraged them to use their voice to speak up. They ultimately developed and acted out a play. This was performed as a part of the Youth Summit. Their research presentation combined multimodal composing and traditional composing with performance.

Finally I would like to share Angel’s story. Angel is a fourth grader. At her school each of the fourth graders, at the end of the school year, were asked to compose and deliver a freedom and democracy speech. They had to pick an issue that was relevant to them and research and ultimately write and memorize a short speech to be delivered to their classmates and teachers. Angel wrote about budget cuts. She did all sorts of background research on the budget crisis and how that was affecting her classroom, with her teachers being laid off. Then she started talking about the relationship between the budget crisis and crime. People thought she was joking. She said, because of the budget crisis, people are committing crimes. Then they have to go to jail. Then more money has to go into the prison system. But if we fixed the budget on the front end and they had jobs, they would not go to jail. Then there would be more money for schools, and our teachers would not get fired.

This is not rocket science. This is a fourth grader, and she is breaking it down. It makes me say, Hmmm . . . how old do you have to be to be the governor in this state? Let the ten-year-old do it!

**Poetry-Inspired Research**

Another example that I wanted to share is how we use poetry to inspire critical youth research. Langston Hughes offers a critical commentary on the American Dream in his famous poem “Harlem” (“A Dream Deferred”). A group of colleagues and I used this poem with our students as a way to frame our research on educational inequality. It is my belief that no kid steps onto a kindergarten campus in September planning to be a high school drop-out. What we have in front of us are dreams. Each one of those kids represents a dream—their own dreams and the dreams of those who loved them and fed them and clothed them and dropped them off and cried when they walked away. We are not as concerned as a society as we could be about the dream, but we want to throw all sorts of money at the explosion of the dream. That is in Langston Hughes’s poem. If you start with the concept of each child in our educational system representing a dream, there is a little bit of a moral imperative that you nurture that dream. Dreams only have to be nurtured. Explosions create all sorts of problems. It is much easier to nurture a dream than to deal with an explosion.

These high school students connected the language of the poem to the high school drop-out rate. How can the educational system further these dreams? I have included some of the slides from the high school kids to provide some sense of the quality and integrity of their work. We have Antero Garcia and Nicole Mirra in attendance, who helped me run this program for many, many years. This is what they look like when they are standing at the podium that the mayor normally stands
Students presenting their findings to the mayor at City Hall.

INEQUALITY OF EDUCATION

HISTORICALLY AND CURRENTLY,
SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS HAVE
LACKED THE NECESSARY RESOURCES NEEDED TO
PROVIDE A QUALITY AND EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

“Despite greater need, 79% of large city districts studied by the Council of
Greater City Schools are funded at a lower rate than are suburban schools;
nationally, advantaged suburban schools spend as much as ten times that
spent by urban poor schools”
(Anyon 1997)

Students’ PowerPoint slide connecting academic research to their claims.

at. Here, they are speaking, and the mayor is sitting and listening to them. They are talking about the inequality of education and connecting that to theory and the research they have done: interviews they have conducted in their neighborhoods, surveys they have distributed, people they have talked to, their field notes. As they present their research, they start with a research question and go through
I love how they end. Instead of having a conclusion at the end of their slides, they have demands, because, as Frederick Douglass (1857) said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has, and it never will.” I also say, if you are speaking, if they have the audacity to let you get on the podium, don’t ever let anybody leave the room without marching orders. If someone is going to sit there and listen to you, they need to leave with marching orders so they have an action plan for families, students, parents, teachers, and policy makers. We have had all sorts of genres that these students have presented in: research reports, conference presentations (including here at NCTE), critical memoirs, policy briefs, plays, digital documentaries, PowerPoint slides, spoken word poems, social media sites... the list goes on and on.

**Students conclude their PowerPoint presentation with a “Demands” section.**

The entire process. Starting a New Movement

So what do we need to do to make tomorrow’s English the norm today and not the exception in our classrooms? We need to start a new movement. Children’s Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman has often said, “If you don’t like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. Just do it one step at a time.” This past Friday at our General Session she encouraged us to, “stop talking about what’s not possible.” Or as Cornel West has reminded us, nihilism is a bourgeois leisure (West, 1993). Nobody has time for us to twiddle our thumbs and be hopeless. Not the people who drop their kids off at the schoolhouse door only to participate in a labor economy that fails to provide them with a livable wage. What they are counting on is that we are nurturing hope. So if we don’t like the way things are, we have to change them.
Action Plan for Families

➢ **Students:** Learn about your school-site council (become a student representative and share the information you learn with others)

➢ **Parents:** Educate yourself about the platforms of politicians running for office in 2010 (VOTE or encourage others to exercise their right to vote)

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Students’ PowerPoint slide offering suggestions for action.

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Action Plan for Community Leaders

➢ **Policy-makers:** Streamline communication between school district and city officials to develop a comprehensive plan to help homeless youth and families.

➢ **Teachers:** Create lessons that connect your subject to the economic crisis (organize student focus groups)

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The students presented teachers and policymakers with an action plan.
How do we change things? A couple of ways that I think are important are what I consider critical action research: the work that we are doing, that Jabari Mahiri and Sarah Freedman discuss in their book on first-year teachers (Mahiri & Freedman, 2014) as the action research movement, teachers thoughtfully exploring life in their classrooms, the work that is shared here at NCTE. What makes it critical? It becomes critical when that work is connected to the conditions that surround literacy teaching and learning in the classroom. We say this is what I am doing, but I am doing it in spite of and not because of the current conditions for literacy teaching and learning. These are the regimes of standards and tests that I have to fight against. This is the culture of institutional racism that I have to fight against to get these books into my classroom. But when I get these books in this classroom, this is what my third graders do. This is what my community college students do. This is what my eighth graders can do. This is what my eleventh-grade History of the Americas class does.

How do we share that? That work becomes critical when we share it internally through our journals and our conference presentations. It becomes critical when we share it through NCTE chats, through social media, on podiums, as part of activism. The best-kept secret in English education is the daily genius in our classrooms that we sit on top of because we don’t know how to share it! The work is not critical until it gets outside the doors! It is powerful inside the doors, but it is revolutionary when it is shared.

I tell people about being radicalized. I am a child of the Civil Rights movement. My parents went to school with the Black Panthers, but I just wanted to be a playwright. I wanted to teach kids about writing. I became radicalized when I became a high school teacher within a system that was doing great harm to children that I quickly came to love as members of my own family. I also realized that there were some things that we were doing in that one English classroom that I would not mind seeing replicated in other classes. So I had to overcome that, wanting to be a playwright, super shy. My aunt said, “How can you be a teacher? You don’t even like to talk.” I am the shyest person I know. I really am, but it was love! It was love for my students. It was that love manifested in a sincere concern for what was happening. But it was also a sense of hope that there was something we could do about it. I began, with their help, to imagine a future greater than our present. I also began to understand that we needed to invent that future. I was asking them to take risks and believe in themselves as world-changers so I too, as the teacher, needed to walk that talk. That was the beginning of my life as an advocate for literacy and for young people. I have never looked back.

We also have to see ourselves becoming advocates for change. I love the recent CCCC theme “The Public Work of Composition” and the CEL (Conference on English Leadership) hashtag #LitLead. I’m also proud to have participated in the NCTE Advocacy days, where large groups of literacy educators descend on Washington, DC. Besides conventions and annual gatherings, there are many other ways that our membership is advocating for change. We advocate internally in our districts. We advocate with our departmental colleagues. We advocate to parents and the public in our neighborhoods. We advocate to school boards. We advocate
to state boards of education. We advocate federally through our communications with our local representatives. If we, the people who teach communication, cannot communicate, who is going to do this in our stead? We know how to do this. This is our living. This is the life to which we are called. We are writers, speakers, thinkers, and teachers. Advocating is not complicated. The complicated part is having the courage to do what we know we need to do. The hard part is doing it alone. So be part of a movement. It is much easier to walk in front of the tank when you have 14,000 of your comrades on the road with you. It is much easier to face fire hoses when there are 5,000 of you, and you are singing gospel hymns. It is much easier when you are walking with people. NCTE should be the place to say that if you are about literacy and social justice, you do not have to walk alone. You do not have to walk alone! To me it is not about making the case for advocacy, it is about making the case for you as advocates. I know I felt the same way. I knew advocacy needed to happen, but who was I? Who are we? We are the most powerful literacy organization in this country. We are the oldest literacy organization in this country. We have the power to act. We have the moral obligation to act. Action is in our organizational DNA!

Critical Hope

We have to foster a critical hope. My colleague Jeff Duncan-Andrade talks about this hope in the face of overwhelming odds (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). You have to
foster that hope. It is our responsibility as a profession to have that hope. People come into our classrooms, they look at us, and what they need from us are reasons to believe. Reasons to believe in the future. Reasons to believe in themselves. How do you foster that hope? I know it is not easy. My parents say that forty-eight years ago it was not easy. Forty-eight years from now it will not be easy. Don’t wait for the end of the struggle. Struggle will be with us, or, I should say, the reasons for struggle will always be with us. I am hoping that the struggle is with us because that means that we have the will and the desire to face oppression and injustice. Struggle is a good thing because oppression is a natural reality, and without struggle oppression happens unabated. Think of the struggle as beautiful because you are embracing it. You are embracing a legacy of people who have struggled on behalf of what is right. Unfortunately, in this world we live in, working for what is right will always be a struggle. New teachers, do not wait for that struggle to go away because you will be disheartened. Just pray or hope that you have the strength to struggle because you are inheriting a legacy of greatness. Critical hope is essential to our future as a profession as it has been essential to our past. The next movement will be fueled by it.

Finally I want to say, what’s love got to do with it? Everything! Everything! It is a term that we do not like to talk about. It is not science-y, like pedagogy, which is a cool term because it has -ogy meaning the study of something. The curriculum, the lesson plans, the amazing, diverse literature that you put in someone’s hands means nothing if you do not love that person. Think about what that means. What does that revolutionary love mean when it is manifested by an English teacher? That is the difference. That you believe in them. That them failing is you failing. You know I think about this all the time. I have three children, and I send my children to school. I don’t expect that at 6:30 in the morning their love is going to be sky high and at 9:00 in the morning it is going to dip down when I am at work and my wife is at work. You better love my children because they deserve it, 24/7. We don’t like to talk about this term. Think about it. You are operating in the public trust. The public trust. How many hours do I leave my children with other people and expect them to feel loved in the same way as they would in their own home? I, like the parents of the other 50 million children who are in the school system. Love has everything to do with it! It does not work without love! It is important for us to think about that.

I will end with a quote from the great educational psychologist Asa Hilliard. He said, “I have never encountered any children in any group who are not geniuses. There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings. The second thing you do is love them.”

With that I will say, NCTE, it has been an amazing privilege to be your president. Thank you!
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Agency in the Age of Peer Production
Quentin D. Vieregge, Kyle D. Stedman, Taylor Joy Mitchell, and Joseph M. Moxley
CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing & Rhetoric Series
$34.00 member/$36.00 nonmember

In this age of peer production, new technologies allow students, teachers, and writing program administrators to talk to and write with one another and assess writing in transformative ways. Teaching and learning are changing, as learning transcends the classroom walls, facilitating new networks, connections, and collaborations.

This qualitative study traces efforts to use social software and peer-production tools to engage graduate students, adjuncts, and faculty at a large state university in a collaborative project to develop a shared common curriculum for first-year composition. The study also tracks the early development of My Reviewers, a Web application designed to improve teacher feedback and peer review, as well as assess writing and critical thinking. The authors explore the impact that peer-production technologies have on power relations between students, teachers, and administrators, ultimately finding that peer production needs to include offline efforts that generate the ethos of a sharing community, and that the most technically inclined members of a community are not necessarily those with the most transformative ideas. The ebb and flow of power, gift giving, and collaboration in this community of teachers reveals the importance of face-to-face interactions and shared values when introducing technological tools to further a shared vision. The results suggest that peer-production and social software assessment initiatives can facilitate both communal and individual agency in the context of a large university writing program.

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