The 2018 NCTE Presidential Address:
Teaching Has Not Left Us: It Has Simply Moved On. Are We Ready to Follow?

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The following is the text of Jocelyn A. Chadwick’s presidential address as delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas, on Sunday, November 18, 2018. The video clips she showed during her talk are available on YouTube (specific links below).

The first video clip is of Hugh Davis, an ELA teacher and librarian at C. S. Brown High School in North Carolina; it can be found at https://youtu.be/0vghSSty67A?t=253.

“I think the man in the story represents a demigod!”
“There really is no American Dream; you know that right?”
“I have never read a whole book before.”
“So just what makes up a genius?”
“What do we want? We want you, our English teachers, to please protect us; make us feel safe. Set the boundaries in your classrooms.”
“So, just why is literacy so important to me? What will it do?”
“I wake up at 4 so that I can catch my bus at 5. My head is on my desk because I have a cyst under my tongue, but I wanted to come to school.”

These are a few of the thousands of comments, perspectives, and concerns students have shared with me and their mates since 2012. The conversation has most assuredly changed from when I was teaching in B-118 at Irving High School, when I was teaching at the University of North Texas, and even when I began teaching at Harvard and continued my work with teachers and students around the country. This change is a generational one, yes, but keenly pivotal is that this change began to transpire because of 9/11 and the Great Recession. Children emerging after these two events comprise what sociologists and psychologists identify as Generation Z. Forged within a seemingly instant fractured economy, uncertainty, challenges never before even imagined, many of these students are amazingly resilient, voiced, insatiably curious risk-takers. Tech-savvy, these students represent our first global citizens, many of whom have never left their homes but have explored places, cultures, trends, movements, catastrophes through Twitter, Snapchat, blogs, apps, and other digital and virtual platforms.
I think about these students constantly. I marvel and contemplate and study just how they and their predilections have affected us, our perceptions, and our ideas of just what teaching English was, is, should be—will be. They are writing, reading, thinking constantly: they tweet, Snapchat, Facebook, blog, Instagram. They are multimodal. They possess a unique lens through which they process not only how to make meaning for themselves, but also how to contextualize as they engage the texts we teach and set about to complete complementary tasks and projects.

I composed this introduction focusing on students because of two friends. One friend, a teacher and writer, sent me the following note: “I have given up teaching. Or maybe teaching has given me up?” And another: “I have taught for 29 years; I feel that the value of my work has been negated.”

As I read these notes from two friends about whom I care much, I began thinking about the bigger picture. I asked myself if my two friends’ feelings that teaching has “left them” and that their contributions to the profession are no longer valued really were indicative of what is happening to some of us, perhaps even to many of us, in teaching English language arts. Or, could the issue be that some of us are succumbing to the stereotype that teaching is no longer valued; that English language arts is not valued as it once was?

In this address, I would like to share with you a message I hope I have conveyed in the past before this phase with NCTE and a message I hope will continue to resonate long after: that message is that we in English language arts set the foundational building blocks for critical reading, critical thinking, critical writing, speaking and listening, and research. We in English language arts foment curiosity and inquiry, discovery and exploration, scaffolding and intersecting, extension and relevance. We in English language arts utilize all in our content arsenal: fiction, nonfiction, grammar and composition, cross-curricular studies, and media. And for Generation Z, we have begun to add digital resources: art, music, film, and other forms of technology. I have found, for example, students are amazed at seeing a digitized version of the text that influenced Frederick Douglass, Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator*. After seeing the actual digitized issues of nineteenth-century Black newspapers, such as *The Elevator, The Colored American, Douglass’ Monthly*, students not only want to read them, but also they seek to peer more deeply into the assigned text as well, wanting to know more about the period and the people and the audience, purpose, and occasion that supported these and many other newspapers and journals. In a similar manner, these students find speeches, letters, interviews equally elucidating as they read assigned texts.

Julia Torres is featured in the second video clip, which is found at https://youtu.be/0vghSSty67A?t=783. She is an ELA teacher and librarian at the Denver Center for International Studies, Montbello.

They *are* engaged; they *are* interested; they *require* that they discover relevance—a relevance that *speaks to* and illustrates their *here and now*. As Chimam-
anda Ngozi Adichie stated in her talk earlier this week, that relevance may actually look like our students, or it may have moments, events, relationships, challenges, aspirations, for example, that resonate with them and/or with others whom they do or do not know personally. What most Generation Z students will decidedly not do is accept one interpretation, one path, a one-size-fits-all approach. Inquiry is their watchword and why is their shield.

In so many wonderful ways, this generation of students is allowing us, encouraging us to assume the mantle of learning and discovering with them. They are rejecting a singularity of meaning in lieu of protean, relevant meaning. Once awakened, these students are willing to “go there” with regard to the deep dive and the close read. Citing Kenneth Burke, these students do become consubstantial with the text, the characters, the incidents once they and we have unlocked a text through exploration and manipulation. Reading becomes wonderfully messy again—an experience where we and our students embark on a journey of adventure, fear, challenge, surprise, conflict, duty, honor, hubris, deceit, treachery, magic, the fantastic, the unexpected, the unimaginable, the unspeakable, heroism, villainy, and the rest of humanity with its characteristic traits. We wrestle with the words and arrangement.

We unlock texts with our students by empowering them, trusting them, expecting from them their best—the best of all of our students. Some may be slower, some may be faster, some may be more deliberate readers. Our guidance and patience and expectations for success empower our students to peer deeply into a text—fiction and nonfiction—searching for the nugget that speaks to them, that reflects their world, that illustrates their experiences, that enables them to transcend the barriers of time and space and unleash their minds and imaginations. In our classrooms with our resources and tools, this generation can utilize reading, thinking, writing, speaking and listening, and research to relate to their present; but also, our students can observe and study human reaction, response, cause and effect, life choices, and challenges of the past.

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The third video clip is of Nathan Morrill, an ELA teacher at Angelo State University and Brady High School in Texas: https://youtu.be/0vghSSty67A?t=1065.

What do we get as their teachers? We get the privilege to embark on this amazing journey and adventure time and time again. We get to know that we are preparing this generation for the “rough side of the mountain,” as the Old Negro spiritual says. And another says, “I’m going up, Going up, Going up all the way, Lord.”

A writer with whom we are all familiar absolutely loved and depended on his teachers—elementary through high school. He once said:
My experiences with Bill and Henrietta Miller and later Evan Winfield provided me with a formative supplemental education during my elementary and junior high school years. In effect, the Winfield-Millers included me in their family, not only sharing cultural activities but making me a participant in their political discussions. My association with Bill Miller gave intellectual support to my instinctive resistance to the oppression I already knew firsthand. (Leeming, 2015, p. 43)

Among this writer’s favorite books growing up were *A Tale of Two Cities; Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Macbeth;* Countee Cullen’s poetry; Henry James’s, Dostoyevsky’s, and Balzac’s fiction.

This writer was James Baldwin.

On teachers and education, James Baldwin (1963) as an adult stated:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. . . . If America is going to become a nation, she must find a way—and this child must help her to find a way to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy which this child represents.

I conclude with the affirmative declaration: Teaching most assuredly has not left us. Our expertise, focus, dedication have not left us. What has transpired is the emergence of a new and non-passive generation; they have emerged with their own unique lens and ways and pathways of seeing, understanding, and making meaning. We must join them on this journey to assure all of their tomorrows. Our doing so will necessarily assure that our students achieve *equity* through life-long literacy, and their attainment will have been through our ceaseless and focused efforts.

**WORKS CITED**


