Teaching Our Students Today, Tomorrow, Forever: Recapturing Our Voices, Our Agency, Our Mission
2017 NCTE Annual Convention Theme and Call for Program Proposals

During the amazing, transformative time spent with English teachers and students in the last few years, I have repeatedly heard about and experienced a sense of frustration, disconnectedness, and lack of respect and voice among far too many ELA teachers. And yet at the end of each experience, hope for a change remains intact, hope for a new pathway of reconnection and energy and reignited passion. It goes without saying that as English language arts educators, PreK–college, we often find ourselves mired in external and internal conditions that ultimately constrain our endeavors. I need not list them, for we are all too familiar with them 24/7. Yet, as we think about those constraints, one central factor is not always the predominant focus.

Success in our profession and our craft depends on several central components: voice, focus, passion, agency, empowerment. Possessing and employing these components every day facilitates our equipping our students for lifelong learning, lifelong thinking, lifelong literacy. Armed with these skills, our students emerge as informed global citizens—ones who read, write, think, speak, and listen critically, reflectively. The central factor? Students. Students’ acquiring a life mastery of the skills and practices we teach must ever remain the critical fulcrum of our efforts.

For those of us who at this time, in this generation teach for a living, teach for a career, and for those of us who teach English language arts in particular, we have witnessed the shifts and eddies in local, state, and federal policies, parental support, undergraduate and graduate training, and local and national attention. At times, it has seemed that anyone at any time for any reason—beneficial or not—has had an opinion about how we teach, what we teach, when we teach, and even why we teach. In all of this amazingly active cacophony, however, I constantly
ponder two critical factors: our students and *our voices as their teachers*. Where were *they* in the conversation? And, I ask, where are they today, at this critical moment?

Reflecting on my first years of teaching at Irving High School in the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex, what has come to strike me as exceptional was how voiced, focused, passionate, expert, and *driven* the teachers of English were; how resolute and yet visionary, ever-focused on students. Flashing forward to today, I have experienced this generation of *students* being focused and exceptionally voiced, curious, driven, risk-taking, and dismissive of preconceived notions of limitations. I have witnessed this generational trait around the country from students across ethnic, class, gender, and other distinctions. I have shared and reveled in their fearless inquiry, their seeking not confrontational challenge but intellectual challenge, seeking to understand—understand themselves, understand us, understand their environment and world, and their place in all of them. They have necessarily drawn me into their world of technology with its ability to make them global citizens without their ever having to leave their communities.

In comparison, my colleagues sometimes leave me with a heavy heart, for I see and listen to and collaborate with ELA teachers who too often feel we have no champions; we have no oasis, no collective refuge to shield or protect us, to provide us with even brief and re-sustaining solace. This sense of *bereftness* continues to remind me of Ulysses’s solemn reflection:

> And this gray spirit yearning in desire
> To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. (Tennyson, “Ulysses,” 1842)

Too often today, similar to this disconsolate king, we are present but restrained. Once seen and heard, some of us now feel neither seen nor heard—acknowledged as English teachers but not as masters of a craft and content we *so* love. And I have asked myself for several years now, why?
How have we found ourselves in this present state? How did we get here? How have our students moved on, while we risk being left behind? Who can possibly tell our stories better, more passionately, than we ourselves?

I have determined over time—the last five years, especially—that we, as ELA teachers, have lost our “one true path,” our “di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura che´ la derritia via era smarrita,” as Dante describes it (Inferno, 1320). Since 2012, the high school students with whom I work around the country compared to the graduate students with whom I often work bring into focus how different our student audience has become. As a result, this difference caused me to think about how we as English teachers have adjusted along the way. Listening to my colleagues revealed to me our collective sense of loss of direction and purpose. And in our path’s being obscured from us, we have also lost our voices, our dreams, our very agency—all requisite traits that have always enabled us to be exceptional content experts and equally energetic, excited co-learners and discoverers with our students, as Freire, Dewey, James, Applebee, and Langer have noted. At present, in so many ways, many of us reflect Hughes’s poem “Harlem” (1951), in that too many of us appear and sound defeated, muted, dismantled, almost in a progressive state of withering on the vine, or as Hughes says,

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester, like a sore—
And then run?

...  
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Since I was a very young child, I have admired those people who held and yet hold every day in the palm of their hands literacy. Through their guidance, the keys and learning pathways to new worlds, new people, new and old ideas, moments in time, the real and the fantastical, lie ahead. Through them, the key to what Toni Morrison describes as “the wilderness of the imagination” awaits to engage and inspire and instruct: English teachers.

As English teachers—PreK through graduate school—we should all seek the same aim: to inform, to expose, to energize, to foment within our students their lifelong ability and desire to think, write, speak, listen, and act critically, regardless of the obvious and not so obvious impediments. Our aim is decidedly not to embrace stereotypes of any sort, to succumb to perceived (and sometimes even real) learning constraints. Our aim is decidedly not to encourage or help to build cultural, intellectual, geographical, or socioeconomic silos, or silos of any kind.

English teachers do not accept the following disturbing notions:

1. Poverty necessarily dooms a student’s ability to learn.
2. Variations of what comprises family doom a student’s ability to learn.
3. Limited exposure to different cultures, foods, travel, etc., dooms a student’s ability to learn.
4. Different languages doom a student’s ability to learn.
5. Race, sexual orientation, class, religion, and gender identifications doom a student’s ability to learn.
6. White privilege dooms the ability of students of color and poor white students to learn and succeed.
7. Collaborating, blending, sharing, experiencing difference, and asking questions doom a student’s ability to learn.

Are these concerns? Yes, keen and prescient concerns. But are they insurmountable in our English classes? Decidedly not, for if we even accept the notion that any one of them poses a serious threat to learning, to a lifelong literacy we offer, then we are already defeated.
So, with this focus, determination, and our reclamation in mind, as we begin the proposal process for our 2017 Annual Convention in St. Louis, we will follow Audre Lorde’s declaration for us to celebrate our differences, morphing them into our strengths that we collaboratively and consciously combine to create an ELA revolution of relevant and sustaining instruction. As Lorde says, “It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

2017 is our year to celebrate ourselves, sing ourselves, sharing and melding our assumptions and our aspirations, “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 1855). And who ultimately benefits from this renewal, this rebuilding, this self-empowerment? Our students today, tomorrow, and forever. We will tell and share our narratives ourselves. We will refuse to lose one single mind among our students. The aim is high, the path wracked with crooks and turns. We are English teachers, and we must recapture our voices, tell our stories, and be about the mission. And we will follow Angelou’s confident assertion in “Still I Rise” (1978) for what we must do:

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

... leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise

Yes, we and our students will indeed rise.

The 2017 Call for Program Proposals:

Teaching Our Students Today, Tomorrow, Forever: Recapturing Our Voices, Our Agency, Our Mission

With the 2017 theme as your GPS, please keep the topic in front of you as you’re writing. The focus is two-fold:
1. Reclaim our voices, thereby allowing us to ignite and exercise our agency and mission.
2. With our renewal and resolve, we engage—ready, excited, working.

A few starter ideas:
- Share how we go about recapturing our voices and champion what we accomplish with, where applicable, the community.
- Share and illustrate how relationships, expectations, and comportment can translate into student engagement and comprehension.
- Share best practices, illustrate strategies that engage our students today, illustrate how blending texts of varying types shows our understanding of the present without sacrificing how literature and writing and thinking are encouraged (traditional texts, nontraditional texts, digital texts, videos, music, art, etc.).
- Share and illustrate ideas of how we can sustain interest and even rediscover relevance in the literature we teach—past and present.
- Share innovative strategies that illustrate to students the efficacy of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Ideas and modeling of analysis and inquiry that engage and spark students’ imaginations are encouraged, as are examples and models of how the importance of what we teach relates to students and lifelong literacy inside and outside of school.

All proposals must include the following information:
- A complete mailing address, email address, phone number, and institutional affiliation for each participant
- A description of no more than 500 words for the session as a whole
- A 50-word synopsis of the session to be included in the print program upon acceptance

In addition, all program proposals must be interactive, engaging the audience and providing clear takeaways.

Please remember that NCTE has online reviewers whom you may contact as pre-readers to help you hone your proposal before you submit it.