

The 2016 NCTE Presidential Address

What Arts of Language Matter Now?

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My talk begins in sorrow and ends in hope.¹ It starts with a blunt question: “How do we teach reading and writing at a moment when traditional assumptions about the effective use of language seem so naïve, so wrong?” How do we teach when evidence and reasoning, eloquence and ethics seem optional?

Let me be concrete. Consider a picture (see Figure 2) taken November 6, 2016, by Reuters photographer Jonathan Ernst in Minneapolis. It contains a multimodal composition, consisting of T-shirt and six words in American Typewriter font, white and red, caps and lowercase: “Rope. Tree. Journalist. Some assembly required.” These six words, and a host of similar tweets, memes, blogs, spray paints, stickers, and so forth, now apparently persuade as effectively as more traditional editorials, articles, and extended analyses.

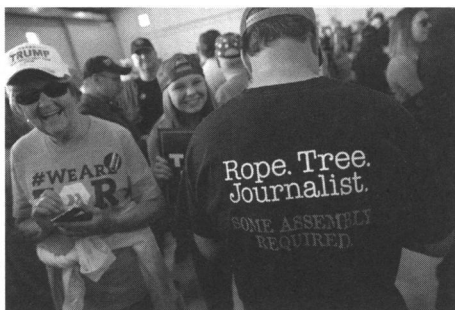


FIGURE 2. *Jonathan Ernst/Reuters*

artifacts from that city in the 1930s, with foreboding effect.

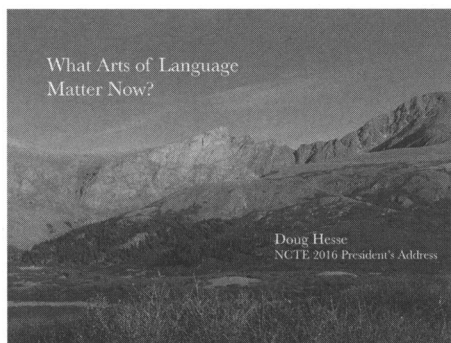


FIGURE 1.

Here’s the deal. I’m the father of two journalists. This shirt implies lynching my daughters. You may say, “Now, calm down, Doug. It’s just words, just humor. Paige and Monica are safe.” But I can’t assume that some mentally twisted Timothy McVeigh-grade patriot isn’t emboldened by declarations that writers deserve death. In July, I was in Munich, where I saw an exhibit filled with posters and written

But let me suppose that this shirt is “just words,” just a guy havin’ some fun, to the delight of onlookers, near and far. That suggests two conclusions fairly chilling to teachers of reading and writing.

Conclusion 1: We live at a time where more than a few citizens deem it reasonable, even desirable, not only to censor, but even to suppress information.

Conclusion 2. We live at a time where language is perceived to have no necessary relation to reality.

It’s hard to decide which prospect is worse. What does an English teacher, a language arts teacher, a composition teacher, a literature teacher, a teacher of new teachers—in short, an NCTE member—what do any of us do with the gap between the obvious power of texts like this T-shirt and pronouncements about the kind of writing deemed to produce career and life readiness? These are pronouncements like the Common Core Standards expectation that students will, for example, “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.”

How can we not be cynical? How can our students not find thesis and support but a quaint custom of schooling? I loathe false distinctions between the academic world and the real world, but the school world does look like reason, with patient lessons against logical fallacies. The real world, in contrast, is pathos, where evidence matters less than outcome.

The satirists among us have already reconciled the differences. Consider the introduction to a “Post-Election College Paper Grading Rubric” appearing on *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency* last Friday [November 11, 2016]:

Dear Students,

Because I can no longer claim with any credibility that reading, writing, and critical thinking are essential skills for 21st-century success, I have revised the grading rubric for your papers accordingly. Effective January 20, 2017.

Sorry for any inconvenience,

Dr. Daveena Tauber

But cynicism doesn’t teach students much beyond cynicism.

I want to be clear what I’m talking about, which is the state of language and not about elections or the state of politics, per se. I leave that to George Orwell. I’ll just say that whatever our individual views, we collectively can’t help but feel a little lost after the past year’s civic discourse.

[sung]

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

A long way from home

A long way from home.

—“Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”

NCTE leaders have responded to language challenges throughout our 105-year history, including during some truly despairing times. In 1942, NCTE Second Vice President Marion C. Sheridan wrote about “The Role of the English Teacher in Wartime” after the 1941 convention—held in Atlanta, by the way. Helen Hartley’s 1946 presidential address, following the defeat of Nazism, outlined “English for These Times.”



I take as my text tonight some familiar language, the NCTE mission statement:

The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.

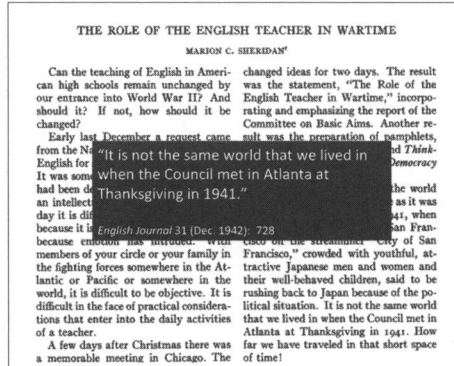


FIGURE 3.

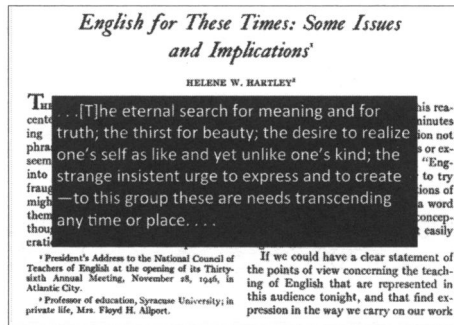


FIGURE 4.

My odd phrase “I take as my text tonight” reaches back to the 1960s, when I grew up in an Iowa farm town. My family belonged to Grace Lutheran Church, a staunch Missouri Synod congregation. The pastor would begin his sermon with this phrase, quote a line or two of scripture, then spend 15 minutes explicating it. These are my earliest experiences with literary interpretation.

I’m focusing specifically on the phrase, “to construct personal and public worlds.” Some forces have foisted a pretty limited view of what constitutes those worlds. They’ve sought to define K–12 education as “college and career readiness” and postsecondary education as “career credentialing.”²² I must believe that these forces, which cross the political spectrum, are well-intentioned. They assume we must meet basic economic conditions before addressing what Maslow would call “higher order” needs like self-expression. I surely agree that we must serve students’ needs as wage earners.

But personal and public worlds transcend the world of work. Our worlds include jobs, yes, but also self-definitions, ideas, and dreams; they include making friends, making knowledge, shaping the civic sphere, whether as awkward seventh graders or weary college professors. We don’t start building personal and public worlds only after we’ve got jobs. We live them as we go. The NCTE mission speaks to constructing whole worlds, not just pieces.

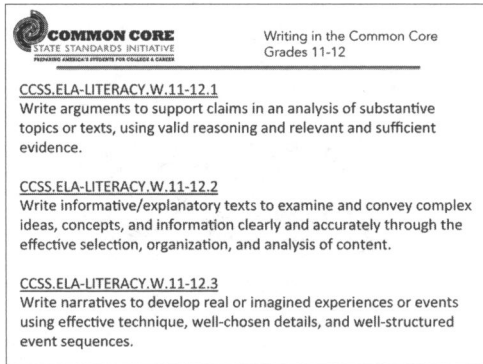


FIGURE 5.

The Grade 11/12 writing standards (see Figure 5) are reasonable enough in their own right—just incomplete. They elide writing grounded in experience and discovery, writing that renders the world to reflect and make sense, delight and console. Such writings are about the texts of experience. Consider five artifacts.

First, here is a sentence written the night the Cubs won the World Series:

I remember driving to games, when such a thing seemed reasonable, and my Dad dutifully paying some inconceivable sum (probably \$20) to double park in someone's reserved spot.

Second, consider the start of a story about mountain climbing in Colorado:

I knew Ryan was extremely busy this year with both wedding plans and a trip to Peru, so I'd assumed a prior talk about him repeating Lizard Head to lead me up was not in the cards.

Third, here are lines from a memoir:

We lived upstairs in a very nice apartment in which we were very happy. A state law had been passed forbidding married women from teaching. (Gibbon)

Fourth, listen to this paragraph.

Clad in a blue sequined halter top and a white skort, I am performing a dance routine to "Who Let the Dogs Out" with my forty identically dressed pre-school classmates at Sacred Heart Secondary School. Our audience is comprised of enthusiastic parents, tight-lipped nuns, and our number one fan: Jesus Christ, who is on the verge of falling off of our school's roof from thirty-four years of peering over the edge of his perch. (Ghosh)

Or, finally, look at a postcard I wrote in 1978 (Figure 6). My friend Theresa returned it to me in October. She'd been sorting through boxes and found one

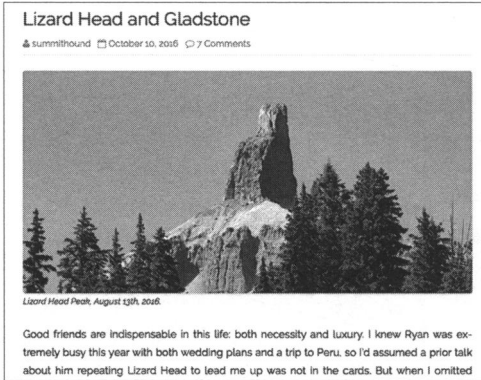


FIGURE 9. Steve Cummins

a political life that relies mainly on categorical absolutes and abstractions, such as “the social safety net” or “Making American Great Again.” The other is a neighborhood life that relies on the concrete, on actions and events, day-to-day, idiosyncratic, often mundane, encounters mainly removed from the sphere of politics. My Denver neighbor, Miguel, may vote for someone else, but we share a fence and a grapevine. We talk about dogs and pass information about new craft beers we’ve seen at the place down the block.

Rosenblum concludes that “Where the democracy of everyday life fails to shape our encounters, we recognize plainly

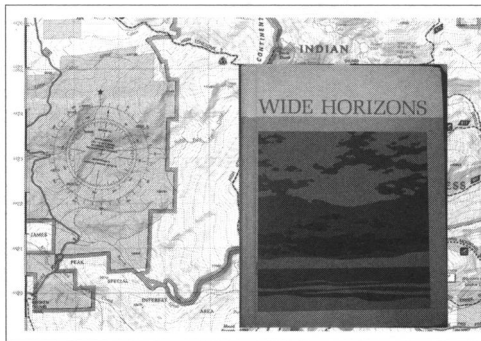


FIGURE 11.

and painfully that the quality of life is deranged” (234). We can reduce others to abstractions. We can lose sight that a journalist is someone’s daughter. In his novel *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler describes a bleak world in which a person is defined as “the quotient of one million divided by one million” (211). If we read and write only certain kinds of things—only arguments, only clickbait—we truncate the possibility of neighborhood life. When we write also about experiences, objects, and encounters, when we do so with curiosity, generosity, and what Keats called negative capability, we make ourselves more visible as individual people.

and I doubt any profit for him. This is writing made for expression and community—and not community rallied around political ideology or action. We need to value more of this.

We need it to build a bigger world of words, one populated by multi-dimensional people who write themselves into it. I take my thinking from Nancy Rosenblum’s recent book, *Good Neighbors*. Rosenblum contends that Americans have two lives. One is

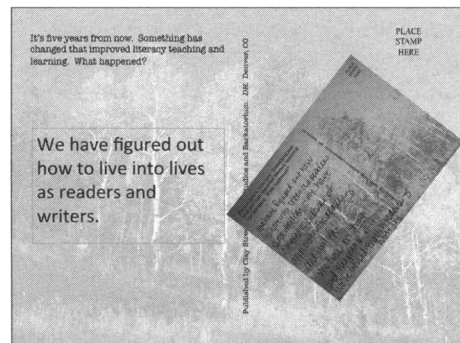


FIGURE 10.

the democracy of everyday life fails to shape our encounters, we recognize plainly and painfully that the quality of life is deranged” (234). We can reduce others to abstractions. We can lose sight that a journalist is someone’s daughter. In his novel *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler describes a bleak world in which a person is defined as “the quotient of one million divided by one million” (211). If we read and write only certain kinds of things—only arguments, only clickbait—we truncate the possibility of neighborhood life. When

In my remaining time, I'll share seven proposals toward these ends.

1. We need to reaffirm the ideals of rigorous thinking, reasoning, and interpretation. We need to insist that there are such things as facts and that ethical writers use them honestly—and that ethical readers are obliged to evaluate, carefully and critically, what writers have said. We have to recognize that some matters demand complex thinking. The point is nothing new;



FIGURE 12.

Marion Sheridan noted at the outset of World War II that “a democracy depends upon the use of words, upon the ability to understand and to discuss questions of freedom, liberty, labor; upon the ability to trace the course of thought and to detect specious arguments, those of your friends or those in magazines, books or those communicated through the radio” (728). If we abandon facts, evidence, reasoning, it’s almost impossible to imagine any kind of a meaningful social contract. We might as well resolve differences with dunking stools or six guns at high noon. We might as well just throw rocks at each other. Some folks are close to that now.

2. At the same time, we must expand our thinking about how persuasion actually works. Aristotle’s triumvirate of logic, emotion, and character is useful and fine, but stories and identification persuade as much these days as logic and evidence.⁴ You might ask, “Teaching a larger view of persuasion sounds fine for college classes, but what about my fifth graders?” You might reasonably say, “But I don’t really know some of this theory, and I surely have no idea of how this translates to my classroom.”

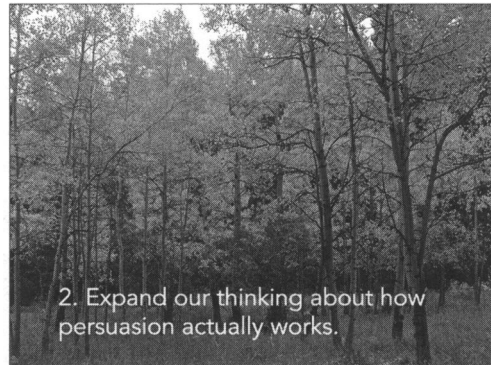


FIGURE 13.

This is the great consolation of NCTE as a richly vertical organization, pre-K to post-16. A grand

NCTE challenge would be to use our broad sweep to teach and learn from each other, in all directions, in these times more than ever. Let’s get out of our specialized silos. Let’s stop sequestering only in sections.

3. We need to study and teach all kinds of texts. We need to pay attention to both *Hamlet* and *Hamilton*, to both the *New York Times* and Twitter. If our classrooms ignore whole domains of reading, we hunker on preciously small home-

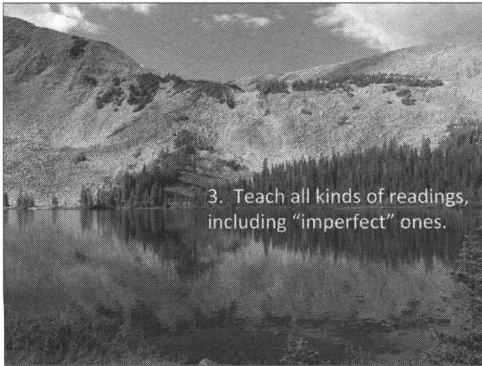


FIGURE 14.

A profound issue confronting NCTE after World War II was how to account for fascism and how teachers might stop it. Obviously, there were deep economic, social, and ideological issues in Europe then, as in America now. But half-truths and hate were conveyed in language, and one remedy was to teach analysis and its ethical use.

4. We must make places for more kinds of writing. We should invite traditionally “creative” writing, of course, but we should also invite writings that

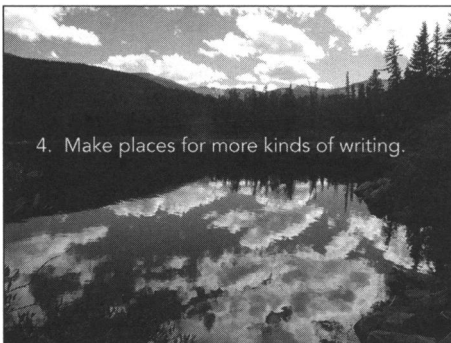


FIGURE 16.

are meaningful or ones so strange as to invite wonder. (See Figure 18.)

Perhaps we have students interview parents or grandparents or community members at least twenty years older than they are, inviting stories around specific questions. For example, “What was a typical Saturday night like when you were my age? Can you tell me about one or two particular nights you remember?” Or, “What

steads, isolated and windswept. Of course, we should have students read the best that has been known and thought. But we should also make a place for studying, I mean *really* studying, the genres and practices of social media.

Maybe we even study texts like the scurrilous T-shirt. Maybe, heaven help us, we teach the comments following online articles. If ever there is a space for critical reading, it’s there.

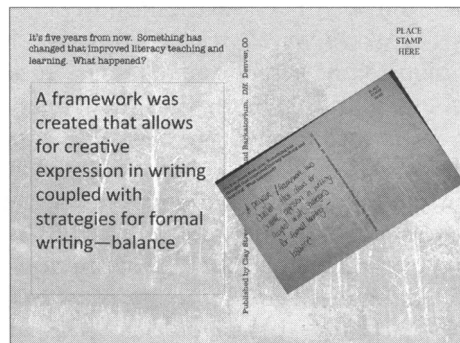


FIGURE 15.

tell and interpret experiences: memoirs, journalism, profiles, personal essays, interviews. We need to build more capacious textual neighborhoods, with playgrounds as well as workplaces.

Perhaps we have students write about meaningful objects, participating in the kinds of writing that Sherry Turkle promoted to such compelling effect in *Evocative Objects*. (See Figure 17.)

Perhaps we have students write about photographs, either ones that

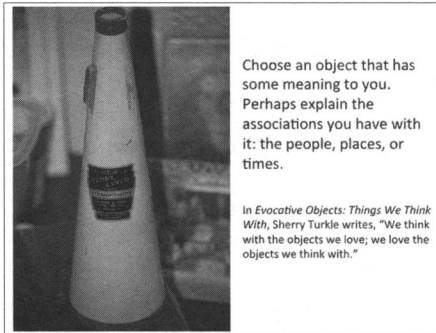


FIGURE 17.

music did you listen to when you were my age? Where did you listen? With whom did you share music?" We have students write, design (perhaps with photographs or art), edit, and publish collections of those interviews as class, co-curricular, or community projects. If we want to go further, we make those collections serve as source materials for further researched writing. For example, are there common themes about kids thirty years ago on Saturday nights? Even further: how do the stories students at one school collect compare with stories collected in another part of the country? Options are endless.

Perhaps we have students write about trips they've taken or imagined, about favorite places—or weird ones. They can be memoirists or journalists. Figure 19, for example, has some pictures I took at Frozen Dead Guy Days in Nederland,

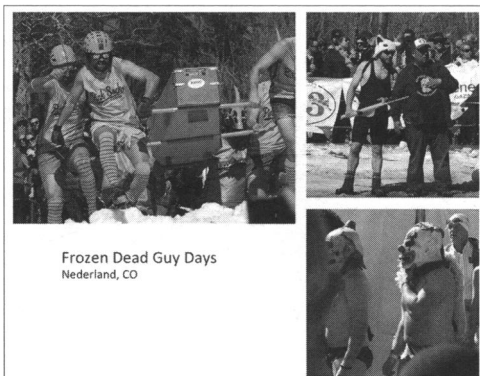


FIGURE 19.

Colorado, a carnival of sorts in the middle of winter featuring, among other things, coffin races. Doesn't that beg for writing? Where can this sort of writing happen in our schools?

Of course, there are endless further options. In conjunction with this year's National Day on Writing, for example, the *New York Times* alone offered "650 Prompts for Narrative and Personal Writing."

Making a place for wide writing

in a practical age is controversial, of

course, but then it's always been. Fifty years ago, in the first volume of *Research in the Teaching of English*, Janet Emig discussed the competition between two impulses for writing: "the communicative" and "the expressive." She noted that American schools focus almost exclusively on the former, which she called, "an unhappy manifestation of American pragmatism." Emig characterized suspicion about

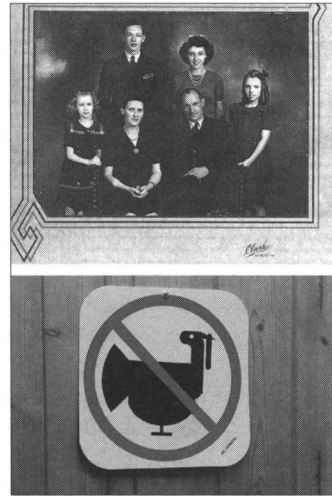


FIGURE 18.

expressive writing as motivated by assumptions that “the imagination is no damn good unless it propels events in the ‘real’ world, such as the hanging of witches, or the dropping of napalm” (132).⁵ We see this celebration of “the practical” energizing the keen interest in STEM today. But this is nothing new. Hartley’s presidential address, assessing post-war prospects for federal funding 70 years ago, complained,

[A]ny part of the curriculum . . . that cannot clearly show its contribution to some immediate phase of current living tends to be pushed . . . into the fringe of academic attention. . . . [W]hen our Congress was last spring considering the establishment of a great federal foundation to meet these times, the only kind of education recognized was to prepare men in the natural sciences. (304)

Deborah Brandt’s recent book, *The Rise of Writing*, analyzes how writing is now ubiquitous in our culture. She finds that “writing is crowding out reading and subordinating reading to its needs” (162). Writing privileges reading practices like surfing, skimming, and sampling. Those practices are good and bad; they get a lot of writing done but at a cost of attention. Think of people forwarding links to articles they haven’t read.

Brandt cautions that, while a lot of writing is happening, our culture has narrowed its scope for many people. Workplace values and demands have compromised citizen writing, and they’ve pressured schools. Brandt concludes:

Even more challenging to the school going forward is the historical affiliation of writing with art, artisanship, craft, vocation, performance, publicity, and earning—parts of the human world that have been suppressed in the abstract, symbol-based routines of the school. . . .

When writing is treated pedagogically in all its fullness, . . . it becomes consequential, dramatic, dangerous, demanding, rewarding, and capable of changing self and others

We have indeed become a nation of writers. What kinds of writers we are capable of being will matter to the kind of nation we can have. (166)

Brandt’s ideas are echoed elsewhere. Consider Richard Florida’s arguments about

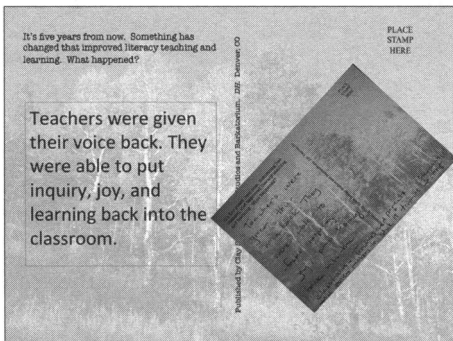


FIGURE 20.

the economic and social values of creativity and his despair that schools, instead of being sources of creativity, have been instead “developed to stamp out workers for the Fordist industrial machine as if they were so many widgets” (391). Ken Robinson, a keynote speaker at our 2012 Convention, observes that “Education is the system that’s supposed to develop our natural abilities and enable us to make our way in the world,” a way that increasingly

demands “the powers of creative thinking,” something he fears schooling stifles (qtd. in Shepherd). Please note that I’m calling for both/and, not either/or. We need both writing for school and work *and* writing for civic purposes *and* writing that explores the world, building selves and neighborhoods.

5. We need to encourage in our schools the allied arts of language, including music, theatre, and art.

Recently, I wondered why I ended up as an English teacher. Because I liked to read and write, of course. But where did that come from? After all, I grew up in a small-town house that had four shelves of books. One of those shelves held the *World Book Encyclopedia*. I used to pick up a volume and read through it. I was a nerd. Another book was one of those single-



FIGURE 21.

volume health references. Every week I diagnosed a new disease in myself. And I seem to have become curiously expert about the anatomy of human reproduction. Clearly, school English was important. I tried to figure out what I’d been reading in junior high. I think one textbook was *Wide Horizons*, whose first excerpt, from Jean George’s *My Side of the Mountain*, was preceded by an intriguing illustrated map, the narrator Sam Gribble’s rendering of the wilderness surrounding his hemlock tree home (Robinson, et al., 20). I’m sure that this reading contributed in some tiny increment to my ongoing love of wilderness, especially as embodied now in Colorado foothills, and to my concern about how we’re treating the natural environment.



FIGURE 22.

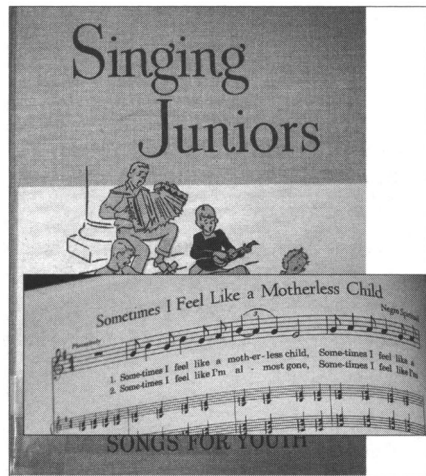


FIGURE 23.

“Map” from *My Side of the Mountain* by Jean Craighead George, © 1959, © 1987 by Jean Craighead George. Used by permission of Dutton Children’s Books (Penguin Random House LLC). All rights reserved.

But experiences in the fine arts also shaped my sense of language. When Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for literature, the choice didn't surprise me. Language and music conjoined have always been an important part of our lives, both outside school and in it. Singing with others in school choruses always expanded my world. I remember one plain song from junior high:

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo
As I walked out in Laredo one day
I saw a young cowboy, all dressed in white linen
Dressed in white linen, as cold as the clay

I'd never been to Texas, let alone to Laredo, and had never met a cowboy. But I sensed that white linen wasn't customary cowboy gear, even in Texas, and I was intrigued by what a dying man would say in this situation, especially to a stranger—and who was this narrator anyway? Imagine what I'd have thought if I'd known back then what I know now: that “Streets of Laredo” has its roots in an eighteenth-century English ballad about a sailor dying of syphilis! My point is that the arts of language, in all forms, provide information, engage literate learners, and stir inquiry. English teachers need to support school spaces for music, drama, art, film, creative magazines, and all the arts of language.

6. We need to foster writing in our communities.

NCTE founded the National Day on Writing eight years ago to make the nation conscious of how writing permeates our lives. We created a vast gallery of writing from all walks of life.⁶

For the past couple of years, NCTE has invited people to use the hashtag #WhyIWrite. When you skim

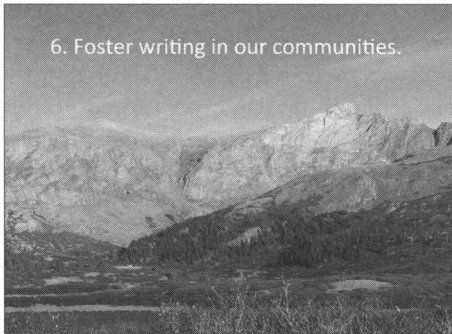


FIGURE 24.

several of the thousands of responses to that invitation, very few say, “To improve my economic situation” or “To get good grades.” (There are exceptions, including the young writer at the University of Denver, represented in Figure 26, who precociously included the meta-language, “to make this paper.”) The overwhelming reasons that people give concern self-expression and making a difference in the world.

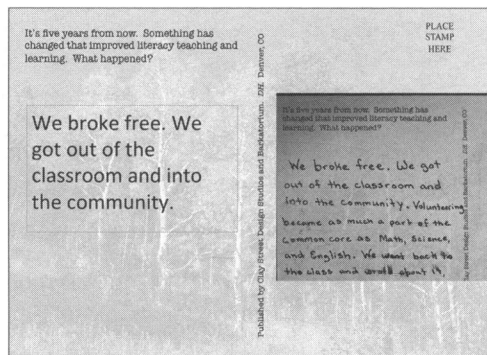


FIGURE 25.

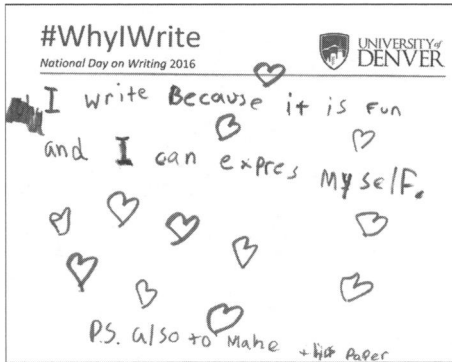


FIGURE 26.

tion. We asked students and faculty, alumni and staff (from groundskeepers and campus police to the chancellor), to tell about an encounter with something unfamiliar. We're gathering and publishing them, including several in a volume we'll print at the end of the year. We're holding readings, poster sessions, and conversations. To illustrate those events, I had planned to show a photograph of a first-year student from Tunisia standing next to his story of encountering the Arab Spring revolution at age 14. He'd given me written permission to do so. But I decided just yesterday afternoon that, in these tumultuous times when Muslims are being targeted by "patriots," I didn't want to risk his identity being circulated even in this hall, and certainly not later through social media.

Let us expand the civic sphere through writing. Let's invite people to write themselves more complexly into the world as individuals with families and friends, with traditions from food to television to mosques, with disappointments as well as triumphs, afraid of failure, afraid of success, perplexed and excited. Let's write ourselves and read each other in full, as neighbors trying to be neighborly, not only triumphant. Let's still make full arguments, think reasonably, confront irresponsible discourse, but do the other writing, too.

Those are six ideas, and a decent speaker would call it quits. But there's no rest yet.

7. Teachers need to write.

Some of you might remember that a year ago in Minneapolis, I invited members to answer a question on a postcard: "It's five years from now. Something has changed that improved literacy teaching and learning. What happened?" About

I challenge NCTE members to foster writing in communities beyond our classrooms. Start by inviting parents and grandparents to write focused memoirs. Use variations of the writing invitations we'd give students. Keep things informal and celebratory. Invite people, perhaps students, to illustrate or design some of the writing.

Let me give you an example. This year the University of Denver Writing Program invited the entire campus to write in response to a single invita-

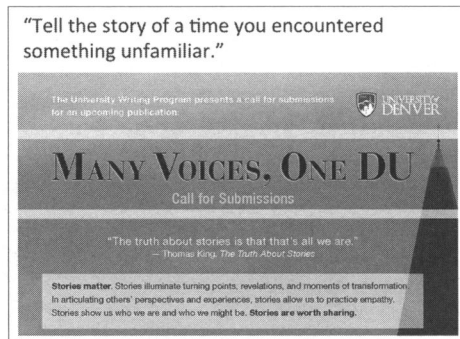


FIGURE 27.

740 people responded. One that catches my attention now is this: “All teachers are writers!” (See Figure 29.) Of course, all teachers comment on projects, send emails to principals and deans, write lessons, and so on. But this writer meant something larger.

As an example of those possibilities, take a look at two slices from an essay written by a high school English teacher in Sacramento, California.

When a 250 pound teenage boy falls out of a chair and hits the ground, he makes a surprisingly loud sound, especially if he crashes into chairs on either side of him and emits an elongated and girlish *aaaaahhhh!*, which is what Walter Hudson did the day I announced that we were going to read an essay by George Orwell.

...

Three more asked if they could write about the time they were shot. The first, Antoinette, had been shot in the eye at a house party and missed a month of school. She came back after the winter holiday with a pirate patch; now, though, she had a glass eye. “I hate it so much,” she whispered when I complimented its likeness to her real eye. (Simonsen, 1, 2)

I encourage you to read the whole thing. You can because its author, Nicole Simonsen, won the 2016 NCTE/Mailer award for Creative Nonfiction. Her work is on the NCTE website. As near as I can tell, no one forced Nichole to write it.

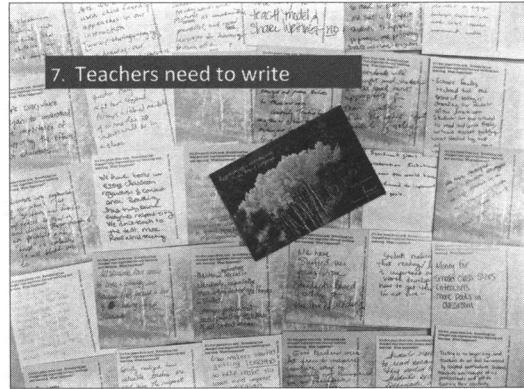


FIGURE 28.

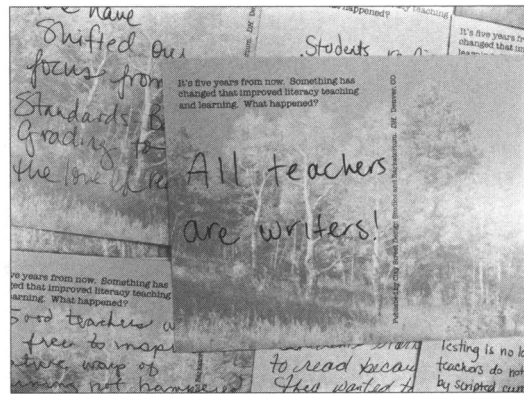


FIGURE 29.

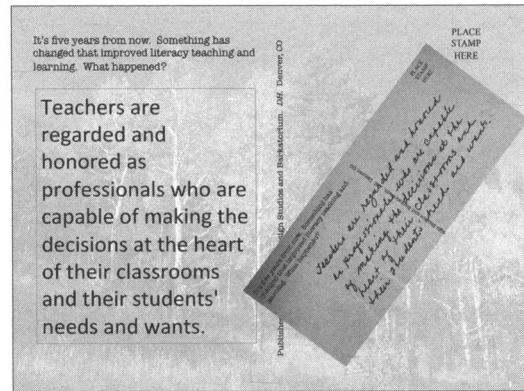


FIGURE 30.

Her essay portrays a classroom, its students, a teacher, and a set of questions. Is it complete? Of course not. Does it tell us everything we should know about learning outcomes? No. Do I agree with every aspect of the classroom? Not quite. Does it contribute to knowledge in our field and to its neighborhood? Absolutely.

We need to write more about our experiences as teachers and professors, about life in classrooms and life in living rooms, at sunrise and midnight, planning classes or grading compositions. We need to write about students and situations, about colleagues and policies, about allies and nemeses. We need, in short, to render the rich vexed texture of the arts of language, our lives in language, replete with photos or sketches or songs, from the whole multimodal palette.

Some of this writing will never find its way out of our notepads or laptops. Some will find a trusted few readers. Some will go into journals or conference talks. Some of it must find larger publics, however. I don't know about you, but I'm beyond tired of people who know none of our field's research, people who have none of our experience, making sweeping pronouncements of what should happen in our classrooms and how it should be assessed. How dare they?!

We need to write as advocates, which means we must read our field's research. But it also means contributing to that research even in the most modestly vital ways: by writing our own stories, so that others, including scholars and advocates, can make sense of them in relation to others. I'll point out a couple of interesting models for archiving masses of stories in ways that researchers can study, code, and analyze.

The first, the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, started years ago by NCTE member Cindy Selfe and her colleagues, is a provocative repository of how people came to read and write, stories of kitchen tables as well as classrooms, sponsored by aunts and uncles as well as teachers. Jessica Heath, a forty-year-old working-class adult student, begins her literacy narrative: "It was the second week of school. I was in the second grade. My family and I had just moved from Aibonito, Puerto Rico to Hesston, Kansas. It felt like we had moved to another planet" (1). Heath continues eloquently for several pages. The DALN site is full of stories for reading, teaching, and research.

Closer to home, the NCTE Assessment Task Force gathered stories from across the Council. Hundreds of teachers answered five open-ended questions about experiences with various forms of assessment and their effects on student learning, for better and worse. A research team distilled the rich information into a report that's potent for information and advocacy (Yancey, et al.).

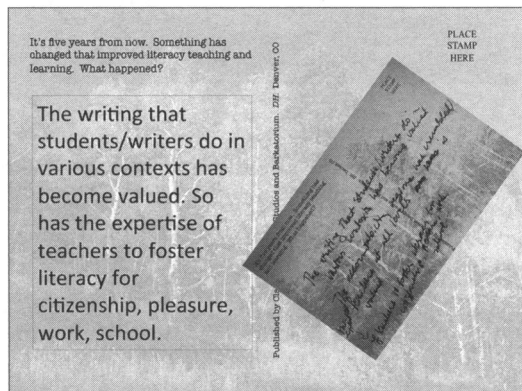


FIGURE 31.

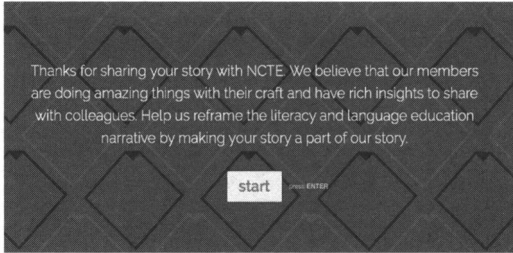


FIGURE 32.

NCTE has begun a comprehensive ongoing initiative to gather stories online. (See Figure 32.)

But we also need to write about our lives beyond teaching. If, as I argue above, our nation needs wider spheres of social discourse, if America needs to build neighborhoods rather than fight clubs, so do America's teachers as writers. Let's write not only about our teaching lives but also our lives beyond classrooms, in memoirs, personal essays, travel narratives, journalistic accounts, avocations, hobbies, clubs, and so on. Let's write about mountain climbing or bowling, working in shelters or knitting, attending concerts or stock car races, about faith, politics, families, or friends, inscribing ourselves fully into the world, sharing that writing with others.

The identity that brings us all to Atlanta is that of teacher. We're united by our commitment to students, our stewardship of language, our belief in literate lives of possibility, in a world enlarged through reading and writing to be more decent, humane, and peaceful. The NCTE mission affirms the use of language to construct personal and public worlds. Let's construct a world with more hope than despair, less hate than inclusion.

I began this talk with sorrow. Obviously nothing I've said the past 30 minutes has swept that away. However, I take consolation in Stephen Sondheim's thoughtful musical *Into the Woods*, a compelling example of the arts of language in concert with music and drama. By intermission, Sondheim's fractured fairy tale world has utterly collapsed into chaos. Then, in the second act, Cinderella and the Baker sing the poignant song "No One Is Alone" to Red Riding Hood.

[sung]

Sometimes people leave you
halfway through the wood.
Others may deceive you.

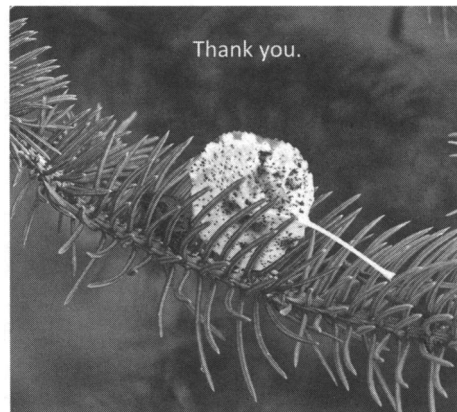


FIGURE 33.

You decide what's good.
You decide alone.
But no one is alone.

Thanks for listening, and thanks for the great privilege to serve as your president.

NOTES

1. Turning a talk—something purposefully written to be delivered, live, in thirty minutes at a specific time and place—into an article presents considerable challenges. Among others, my address in Atlanta included 59 images. Space considerations (and a few licensing complexities) prevent including all of them here. I've tried, then, to be parsimonious, sometimes at the cost of information and, certainly, of aesthetics. A second challenge is that a 30-minute talk allows much less elaboration and scholarly context than readers expect from an article. It's tempting to puff things up for print and posterity. However, I've chosen to present the main text of the talk essentially as I delivered it orally—with a few adjustments to incorporate information that had been in slides. The one scholarly accommodation I've made is to include a few discursive footnotes. This may seem pedantic or a smarmy homage to my late friend David Foster Wallace; however, I think the extra commentary is crucial—and that its inclusion in the body of the talk itself would be unfaithful to what I actually said on November 17, 2016. What I can't do in print is sing, which I did three times in Atlanta. You'll see pieces of lyrics from three songs. Imagine a baritone voice, cracking a bit at the end.

2. The most obvious example of a truncated view of education's purpose is the Common Core State Standard goal of "college and career readiness." However, education as primarily career preparation is a central assumption of most current school reform efforts that originate outside schools themselves. The Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan for 2017 to 2020, to cite one example, privileges meeting "the nation's need for talent" and increasing student credentialing toward "a better life through increased attainment." (2).

3. I confess appreciating the Common Core State Standards' insistence on wider territories than literature for reading and writing, their ascribing literacy responsibilities to teachers in addition to English, and their emphasis on critical thinking and analysis. I valued the recognition that students live in a global world and have the right and need to read texts and practice critical thinking skills that may lie outside sometimes-restrictive local standards. Many civil rights groups shared that latter perspective and have surprisingly—to my mind—supported much of the testing that emerged, as a lever toward equity. My appreciations notwithstanding, I remain dismayed by how standards were developed without thorough teacher input, by the way assessments were designed, and by the uses to which many would put test results. I discuss these reservations in "Who Speaks for Writing?"

4. Strategists and theorists, from public relations experts to academic scholars, have long recognized the strong force that stories and anecdotes have in persuasion, drawing on complex identification strategies and "logics" that are contained in stories. Twentieth-century rhetoricians have provided rich complements to the familiar categories of Aristotelian rhetoric. Kenneth Burke, for example, in his 1939 essay "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" discusses several strategies, including positing a common enemy, using slogans, and employing unification devices. Fifty years ago, Richard

Larson called attention to Burke and other rhetoricians' potential value in secondary classrooms as well as in college.

5. "Expressive" writing has been a vexed term in the fifty years since Emig wrote about it, often with an unwarranted and reductive notion that it means something akin to "indulgently pouring out your guts." More reasonable theories of expressive writing draw on the tradition of writing that begins with the writer's experience or interest and seeks to render that interest for others, whether that writing takes one of the forms of creative nonfiction (personal essay, profile, travel writing, etc.) or journalism. The famous 1966 Dartmouth Seminar revealed a wide gap between American and British English educators, the latter seeing expression and "creative" writing much more positively, as recounted in John Dixon's *Growth in English*. At the 1967 NCTE Annual Convention, Dixon emphasized that point by calling for "using language to bring articulation and coherence to our living experience" ("Creative Expression," 796).

6. A key focus in NCTE's promotion of the first National Day on Writing (in October 2009) was to invite "average" people to recognize how much they lived lives through writing, whether on the job, in social settings, or for personal reasons. We wanted them to share and celebrate everyday writing and themselves as writers.

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