

NCTE & Me: Reflections on the Council's Role in One Teacher's Life

*NCTE was central to the
author's career journey.*

As the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) marks its first century of existence, the Council and its members are rightfully looking back across the years in appreciation of what its members, and its collective members over time, have accomplished. I am one of many who can say that life without NCTE would have unfolded much differently, and far less richly. I would have become an English teacher, and then a teacher of English education, in all likelihood. But without NCTE and all that it offers—the community, the journals, the conferences, the committees, the books, the tremendous array of online resources, and even all of the disagreements and occasional battles—I cannot imagine I would be the same teacher I have become through my membership and participation. Perhaps the story of my involvement can illuminate what I have found so gratifying about my relationship with NCTE as my experiences with and roles in the profession have changed over time.

A Pre-History

I had no plans to teach, or to embark on anything else resembling a career, when I graduated from Kenyon College in 1974. Kenyon, as a small liberal arts college, did not even offer teaching credentials at the time. I was a straight-up English literature major at a college where John Crowe Ransom, a founding father of New Criticism, still walked the campus until he died during my sophomore year. He cast quite a shadow on the faculty, who practiced his analytic emphasis and formal-technical

approach to criticism. None of that personal meaning stuff for us: Our job was to dissect texts, preferably in a way that our professors liked. I do not intend here to question the quality of their teaching, which was highly valued at Kenyon. I am simply stating the orientation of their approach, one that I was never able to carry out well or feel entirely comfortable with as an undergraduate.

My entry into teaching came a few years following my graduation, after some floundering around while, to put it generously, trying to find myself. I learned that I needed to generate some income, which I realized was probably necessary after leaving the cocoon of Kenyon. The college was known to its students as the “Magic Mountain” for the way it insulated us from life’s realities and where we nonetheless created our own realities—one of the truly magical possibilities of small, remote liberal arts institutions. While looking for work after graduation, I found that my English degree was not terribly practical in the world of commerce, a world that I found unappealing anyhow. As a stopgap measure, I began substitute teaching in and around Trenton, New Jersey, in every subject and grade level at which a teacher might be absent, which they chose to be quite often, much to my benefit.

The bridge over the Delaware River still bears the motto that nearly spans its height and length, “Trenton Makes, the World Takes,” although by the 1970s it was not making much anymore, leaving the schools cash-short and filled with students living in poverty. Subbing opportunities were plentiful, with teachers provided with more than

20 sick and personal days per year and work conditions that were often dispiriting. I stepped into this breach and into their classrooms, and I found that, in spite of the fact that I was rarely provided with lessons plans—or any plans at all—during my daily sojourns, I might have found something I wanted to do with my life.

For a couple of years I substitute taught and worked as a hall monitor in a different urban school district while beginning a certification program at one of the local state universities. I was not too stimulated by the teacher education program and began to mull over other possibilities, ultimately deciding to take the civil service test to become a parole officer in New Jersey. Then, much to my surprise, I was admitted to the MAT program at the University of Chicago, and I moved to the Windy City to spend one intensive year under the very intensive direction of George Hillocks.

Launching a Teaching Career

During my MAT program, I taught in three very different schools: doing a practicum at the tony University of Chicago Lab School, conveniently located in Judd Hall where Chicago's Education Department was housed; student teaching at Martin Luther King High School, a comprehensive public school on Chicago's South Side; and teaching in the Pilot Enrichment/Upward Bound pull-out program directed by Larry Hawkins, a legendary high school basketball coach who shifted his attention to academics after being the first African American coach to win a state championship in Illinois. I therefore had the opportunity to apply what I was learning in my education coursework to my various teaching assignments in these three diverse settings.

Even with largely urban experiences to my credit, my first job after completing the MAT program was in a suburban district, the first of three schools I taught in over the next 13 years in the Chicago area. I did not join NCTE immediately when my career began, even though I knew that George Hillocks was active in the Council. For my first four years in the classroom I also coached, first track and then three years of basketball, a sport I played in high school and one year of college. These commitments, especially basketball, which ran from November through March, along with the heavy paper

grading load I had as an English teacher and my fleeting efforts to establish a social life, provided little opportunity to get involved with NCTE. Only after I decided to depart the coaching ranks and undertake further graduate studies did NCTE enter my life. Once it did, it was hard to shake, and I cannot imagine how my career might have developed without the Council as a professional home.

NCTE's Support for a Classroom Teacher

NCTE has provided me with different means of support, opportunity, connection, and stimulation at different points in my career. My first experience with the Council came in the mid-1980s when, during my doctoral studies, George Hillocks added me as a discussant to a session he was presenting at the annual fall convention on his review of research in writing, later published in 1986 as *Research on Written Composition*. At the time I was both a full-time teacher and part-time doctoral student, and NCTE satisfied me at both levels. As a teacher, it provided me with a subscription to *English Journal*, which enabled me to learn perspectives on teaching and learning from outside my school and graduate studies. In these pre-Internet years, connecting with other teachers was very cumbersome, often involving travel. NCTE journals provided a way to hear how other teachers were thinking about their work and applying their ideas practically, just by opening my mailbox. I also became exposed to an entirely new world through NCTE's *Research in the Teaching of English (RTE)*, a journal with which I have subsequently had a long and fulfilling relationship.

But for me at the time, the most anticipated and stimulating event of the year was the NCTE Annual Convention. Through George Hillocks's encouragement, I helped to form a small group of teachers from his circle of students, and even though we were spread across schools that spanned the Chicago metropolitan area, we always made time to meet and plan presentations for the Annual Convention and other professional meetings. These included the conference of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE), where we became regular attendees and presenters. The generosity of friends helped us to get established as writers and presenters: Larry Johannessen, Betsy Kahn, and Carolyn Walter had formed a prototypical Chi-

icago work group that had produced two books in NCTE's Theory and Research into Practice (TRIP) series (1982, 1984) and had begun to write for *English Journal* and other journals, and encouraged us by providing us with copies of successful conference and book proposals they had written.

By working with Tom McCann and Steve Kern, and with support from Larry, Betsy, and Carolyn, I was able to get a leg up in my efforts to enter the field as an author and presenter. I was appreciative of my opportunities as a consumer of ideas from conferences and journals but, urged and encouraged by the models provided by friends and advisors from Chicago, felt that I might have something to offer others as well by thinking about my teaching and sharing effective practices with others. Tom, Steve, and I were able to package our work successfully, with presentations at both NCTE and IATE conferences and ultimately with our own TRIP book, published in 1987 on the use of introductory activities for both writing and reading instruction.

I was most fortunate to teach in schools that supported conference attendance for presenters. Both Barrington and Oak Park–River Forest high schools compensated us for our travel expenses if we had speaking roles at conferences, and I took advantage of this funding to submit applications annually, not only to the NCTE Annual Convention but to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and spring conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), where my doctoral research on writing process had some relevance. Over time I have presented at these conferences as well as the now-defunct NCTE spring conference, although after several exhausting springs of attending the CCCC, NCTE spring, and AERA conferences in succession, I elected to cut back on my presentation tours.

On the whole, my secondary school teaching career was tremendously stimulated by my involvement with NCTE. It helped to improve my teaching, provided me with a network of greatly cherished friends from around the field and country, served to launch my work as a writer and presenter, and boosted my confidence as a teacher not only through the ideas I gathered but also through the positive feedback I got from my writing and presenting. I felt as though I was part of something

beyond my school and local life that was stimulating and connected to the history and destiny of the field. This sense of belonging and affiliation helped me to see that the field consisted of more than just my classroom or school. Rather, I was part of a great discipline, one that I had the opportunity to help build toward the future. The Council gave me a role in the teaching of English that simply was not available within the confines of my classroom.

Changing Venues: Starting Over in a University Setting

When I completed my doctorate in 1989, I had a difficult decision to make. I was happy teaching, although my school had taken an administrative turn that greatly stressed faculty morale and undermined the sense of satisfaction I would build at Oak Park–River Forest High School in my five years on the faculty. What appealed to me about university teaching was that it supported writing in ways that high school teaching did not. As most readers of this journal well know, a high school job, especially in the grading-intensive discipline of English, places incredible demands on a teacher's time. There is virtually no reward for publishing articles and books beyond the ego boost and occasional pittance of a royalty check (I am one of many I know who has cashed royalty checks of under \$1, or somehow managed to have accrued negative sales during a royalty period). Indeed, I found that my success as a writer distanced me from many of my colleagues, who assumed that if I was spending time writing and presenting about how to teach effectively, then I was not fully dedicated to teaching. I also sensed that my gravitation to social science research represented a departure from the humanities orientation of many of my colleagues, who perhaps felt alienated by some of the new terms and jargon that began to appear in my teaching vocabulary.

Meanwhile, my writing had begun to move to the center of my interests and identity as an educator. I began having success as a writer of educational practice, theory, and research; my confidence in my academic writing started to grow. My realization that I wanted to dedicate myself to academic writing convinced me that it was time to change venues and seek life in a university setting with a publish or perish orientation. By making this move, my life

changed in many ways, including my relationship with NCTE.

NCTE's Research Mission

As a high school teacher, I found the Council stimulating and worthwhile for its practical emphasis. When I began teaching at the University of Oklahoma, I understood the need to serve this primary function of the Council through my writing and presenting, but also began to explore other niches that supported university faculty and their work. My entry into the NCTE research community came through my attendance at the Assembly for Research Midwinter Conference, conveniently located in Chicago and thus accessible to me during my doctoral studies and final years of high school teaching. After moving to Oklahoma, I benefited from an appointment to the Council's Standing Committee on Research, which I was asked to chair for a year toward the end of my term of service. Through this experience I better learned the machinations of NCTE's research apparatus and its role of oversight over all research activity in the Council. I was able to plan the research strand for the Annual Convention, understand the role of *RTE*, learn the operations of the Research Foundation, increase my involvement with the Assembly for Research, and understand better the informal relationship between NCTE and the National Conference for Research on Language and Literacy (NCRLL).

Eventually, I served each of these organizations, both as member and ultimately as chair, editor, or president. In many cases my term of service left little of lasting impact, other than launching a website and trying to help redefine its mission; for instance, I do not think that NCRLL was dramatically altered by my presidency. I have managed to do some work, however, of which I remain proud. The Research Foundation, for example, had historically served primarily to issue small grants—up to \$5,000—to individual researchers based on the quality of their proposed studies and relevance to NCTE's mission. During the years in which I was chair, the national economy went sour, and so did the Foundation's investments. We did not have much to give away and so needed to figure out some way of getting the greatest possible impact from the small pot of money we had to award.



The cover of *Research in the Teaching of English* during the author's coeditorship.

At the time I was also co-editing *RTE* with Michael Smith, sitting on the Standing Committee for Research as *RTE* coeditor, serving as president of NCRLL, and recovering from a term as co-chair with Carol Lee of the Assembly for Research. As I went from meeting to meeting at the Annual Convention, I heard a recurring theme from friends such as Carol and Arnetha Ball: that NCTE was not providing much of a home for scholars of color. By the time I got to the Sunday morning meeting of the Research Foundation, this concern had been reiterated to the point where I began to wonder what could be done to make the Council a more congenial, attractive, and supportive place for scholars of color, who were at the forefront of studies of urban schools and the achievement of minority students, issues of paramount importance to the nation.

By coincidence, one of my own doctoral students, Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, was at the time part of a Spencer Foundation program supporting doctoral research. She loved the program: She was part of a group of awardees that met several times a year and had access to a senior scholar who served as a mentor. This program, I came to realize at the conference, could provide a model for a program sponsored by the Research Foundation. I proposed this idea at the meeting on Sunday morning, and the group approved it enthusiastically.

All we had to do then was figure out how to structure and finance it. These preparations took place over the following year, with considerable contributions from Arnetha Ball, Shuaib Meacham,

Mary Nicolini, and other members of the Foundation. Through these efforts we initiated the Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV) program. One key adjustment we made from the Spencer format for CNV, as it is now known in its tenth year of operation and as it prepares to welcome its sixth cohort of two-year Fellows, was proposed by Shuaib Meacham. He too had been a Spencer Fellow and felt that the program had too great a top-down structure, with Fellows expected to gravitate to the values and practices of their mentors and other senior advisors. For CNV, Shuaib insisted that the relationship be conducted on more egalitarian grounds: that we assume that the young scholars of color have perspectives previously inaccessible to established senior researchers, and that the program be structured to cultivate their voices (and thus the name of the program) by listening as much as by leading.

The creation of the CNV program illustrates much about why I value NCTE, because it shows how the Council both gives to its members and provides opportunities to give back through service. I joined NCTE both to learn and to create ways for me to advance my career as writer and presenter. Through my participation I ended up learning of new niches that provided opportunities for me and gave me ways to create breaks for others. This mutually enriching sort of experience has been a primary reason that I have remained a Council member, because through its programs and publications I have access to vehicles for learning and for opportunities to publish my own work. At the same time, through its committees and other groups, I have had a chance to create these opportunities for people at early career stages. What could be more satisfying than that?

NCTE and the Teacher Educator

As a university professor I do more than write and serve on committees. For the last 20 years I have taught courses for preservice teachers, for practicing teachers earning graduate degrees, and for full-time students earning doctorates. NCTE has served them all quite well, and they in turn have often served the Council.

For my teaching of preservice teachers, my focus is on the design of conceptual units of in-

struction (see Smagorinsky, *Teaching English by Design*), an emphasis from George Hillocks's MAT program at Chicago that I still share. My students draw on a variety of resources for their unit designs, including those provided by NCTE in its ever-expanding set of online resources. In designing units organized around a theme, movement, genre or archetype, geographic region, particular author, historical period, or strategy, my students rely on support from practicing teachers to borrow and adapt ideas for their own purposes. Among the resources I provide at the Outlines for Conceptual Units I have developed and posted at http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/VirtualLibrary/Unit_Outlines.htm, I include a great many links to lessons archived in NCTE's ReadWriteThink (<http://www.readwritethink.org>), which includes a tremendous variety of peer-reviewed activities and instructional sequences for teaching just about anything under the English language arts sun. I have combed through this resource to match lessons and activities with unit topics to help our teacher candidates learn where they can find useful teaching materials that have been tested in the classroom. My students inevitably point to ReadWriteThink when referring to the best source of materials they have found to support their teaching.

I also encourage our teacher candidates to include student writing in their designs, and the magazine *Teen Ink* provides a strong archive of good student writing that they can use as models, as representatives of a unit concept, and as stimuli for students to take their own writing seriously. My University of Georgia colleague Peg Graham annually takes her entire undergraduate cohort of preservice teachers to the convention of our state affiliate, the Georgia Council of Teachers of English, as a way to network for eventual jobs, pick up teaching ideas, and often to present their own ideas. And, of course, students in our certification programs are assigned articles from NCTE journals, especially *English Journal*, to provide them with the best our profession has to offer the practicing teacher.

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Graduate classes draw on both *English Journal* and other NCTE journals for class readings and to encourage our students to become more active in the Council. I do not think I have ever taught a doctoral seminar without generous helpings of articles from *RTE*, and we have had many of our graduate students publish in *RTE*, *English Education*, *English Journal*, *Voices from the Middle*, and journals from outside the purview of NCTE. I also have often asked editors of NCTE journals to allow my doctoral seminars to conduct a collaborative review of a journal article submission, which helps them understand the publication process from the inside out.

At the graduate level, we also encourage our students to become active in the Conference on English Education (CEE), which serves as a point of entrée should they pursue positions in universities following graduation. Our students have been active in the two foundational CEE summits in Atlanta and Lake Forest, Illinois, have published their work in *English Education*, have been involved in the newly revived CEE summer conference, and have taken roles in the operation of the organization.

Their activity in CEE illustrates the abundance of niches within the Council and how one's participation may evolve to follow their emerging and developing career paths. Just about everyone begins his or her NCTE involvement as a practitioner oriented to NCTE's primary mission of serving classroom teachers. Remaining in that role through the conference, journal subscriptions, discussion list involvement, and many other facets of the Council's offerings could provide many lifetimes of stimulation. But should new interests develop, members can then gravitate to the more specific opportunities that the Council provides to develop their interests and careers. I have mentioned those that have more prominently figured in my own professional pathway, but others might mention additional ones: the sections (e.g., the Secondary Section), the commissions (e.g., the Commission

on Writing), the Assemblies (e.g., the Assembly on Young Adolescent Literature, ALAN, and its journal, *ALAN Review*), the conferences and umbrellas (e.g., the Whole Language Umbrella), and others. They might also take advantage of the online resources, including ReadWriteThink, the webcasts, the discussion lists, and so on.

NCTE and You

I have always been puzzled at the fact that, with all that NCTE has to offer, more practicing teachers are not members. I taught in some highly regarded high schools in which I was among the few members of large faculties to join and take advantage of its resources. These resources have only grown more abundant and better with each passing year as NCTE tries to serve its members and improve the quality of teaching. I hope that my reflection on my own experiences with the Council helps others to think about where they would be without NCTE and to persuade colleagues of the possibilities that await them through their membership. 

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