

Teaching, Learning, and Growing as a Member of a Professional Education Community

What role do professional organizations play in helping us live our lives as intellectuals?

**David Bloome
and
Jerome C. Harste**

Although our histories as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers are different, we have both belonged to the National Council of Teachers of English for more than twenty years. For us, NCTE has served as a professional community where we have been able to grow as teachers, readers, writers, and intellectuals.

Unfortunately, there has been little discussion and even less publicity about teachers as intellectuals, as if being an intellectual was an undesirable trait for a teacher (however, see Giroux, 1988; and Giroux & Shannon, 1997, for insightful discussions). The stereotype of the intellectual as removed from the world bears little resemblance to what we know to be the case. For us, being an intellectual means

engaging the world, acting on it and in it, reflecting on and learning from the events around us and from our interactions with others. It also means being political, as there can be no thought or action that is neutral with regard to social justice.

It is hard, however, to grow as a teacher and as an intellectual in isolation. Literacy and knowledge isn't about having the "right" information and advocating for it. Knowledge is dynamic, critical, and reflective. There is not one literacy but many literacies (Street, 2000). To experience what it means to be an intellectual, all of us need a community within which to grow. For us, that community is NCTE.

Being an intellectual means engaging the world, acting on it and in it, reflecting on and learning from the events around us and from our interactions with others.

NCTE is not a homogenous community. One is as likely to find people with whom one disagrees as with whom one agrees. But the talk, discussion, and argument all derive from the premise that language and literacy are tools for building a life, not just skills for getting and doing a job.

We live at a time when the greatest threats to education come not from the obvious difficulties with the funding of schools and the ubiquity of testing, but from the attempt to transform education into a business, students into human development capital, and teachers into mindless "production line" workers. Reading, writing, and literature are transformed into achievement test scores for the measurement of human development capital; their use as tools for reflection, personal growth, creativity, and exploring the meaning of human relationships is marginalized.

The threats to our lives as intellectuals and caring educators also come from the language that surrounds us. So many of the current ways of using language seem to reflect either a sterilized, technocratic, and ahistorical stance ("The key to excellence is to raise educational standards," "Finland outperforms America in reading") or an empy-

minded, emotionally charged rhetoric of so-called “truths” and “morality” that eschew any sense of empathy or tolerance (“Social promotion is soft racism,” “Multicultural literature dumbs down the curriculum”). We are bombarded with such language by the mass media, the state, supermarkets, the academy, and elsewhere. NCTE is one of the few places where we can go as educators to critique that language and contest it. Sometimes we are successful in doing so, sometimes we are not. Regardless, we share a common desire to create and celebrate what Toni Morrison (1993) has called the “midwifery properties of language”—the use of language to bring new life, caring relationships, imagination, and possibility into the world and to help others do so. Part of what’s common to our community is the understanding that whether it is in literature, in the stories our students write, in the storytelling that goes on in kitchens and neighborhoods, or in our own life histories, it is the “midwifery properties of language” that make human relationships possible and worthwhile. As Raymond

Williams (1977) notes, “A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human

**To experience what it
means to be an
intellectual, all of us
need a community
within which to grow.**

beings in the world” (p. 21). What is at stake then, for us, is nothing less than what it means to be human and who gets to determine that.

For us, belonging to the NCTE community means accepting the challenge to resist the trends toward defining and talking about education and language as a market commodity. It means helping to create a space for teachers and students to grow as intellectuals, build a meaningful life through reading, writing, and the language arts, and engage in critique and reflection about what is happening in their life and the lives of others. It means creating, celebrating, and making acces-

sible to others the “midwifery properties of language.” •

References

- Giroux, H. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A., & Shannon, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Education and cultural studies: Toward a performative practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Morrison, T. *Nobel lecture*. <http://nobel.sdsc.edu/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html/>. (Mar. 2001).
- Street, B. (2000). Of what use is the ethnography of literacy to development? *Community Literacies (Community Literacy Project Nepal Newsletter)*, 1 (1), 4–7.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Author Biographies

David Bloome is professor of Education at Vanderbilt University and is currently serving as Vice President of NCTE. **Jerome C. Harste** is professor of Language Education at Indiana University where he holds the Martha Lea and Bill Armstrong Chair in Teacher Education. He is immediate past president of NCTE.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Dedicated to teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and interests, *Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning (JAEPL)* invites submissions for its seventh annual issue. We solicit theory-grounded manuscripts that discuss pedagogical concerns focusing on topics that extend beyond currently accepted attitudes toward, and paradigms of, language. We invite an exploration of subjects that range over a spectrum of interests including, but not limited to, emotion, imagery, kinesthetics, ecofeminism, situated knowledge, meditation, healing, inspiration.

Send by **January 31, 2002**, four copies of letter-quality manuscripts (attach postage for mailing three copies to readers), MLA style (electronic submissions are welcome), approximately 12–15 pages including works cited to: Linda Calendrillo, Coeditor of *JAEPL*, Department of English, 1 Big Red Way, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101 (linda.calendrillo@wku.edu). Send editorial inquiries to: Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Coeditor, *JAEPL*, Department of English, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306-0460 (kflecken@gw.bsu.edu). Visit our Web site at: <http://www.bsu.edu/english/jaepl>.