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From “Turning the Page” to Getting Our Noses out of the Book: How NCTE Can Translate Its Words into Activism


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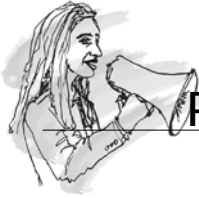
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Provocateur Pieces*

From “Turning the Page” to Getting Our Noses out of the Book: How NCTE Can Translate Its Words into Activism

Noah Asher Golden and Deborah Bieler

This article raises questions about the role of NCTE in an era of widespread education reform that often runs counter to a wide body of scholarship and members’ understandings of ways to build strong, equitable educational systems. The authors call on NCTE to reinvent itself primarily as a space from which to take action toward equity and justice. This provocateur piece offers a loving critique of NCTE’s notion of advocacy at a time when neoliberal education reforms limit educators’ capacity to carry out our collective responsibilities to marginalized and vulnerable youth.

When state-sponsored violence, discrimination, and injustice threaten to overwhelm many people, causing them to withdraw, alone and fearful, into despair, professional organizations such as NCTE would do well to reinvent themselves primarily as spaces from which members can respond to challenges by taking collective action toward equity and justice. Education and professional meetings can and do serve as sites of critical dialogue and analysis, but this should not be their only function. In this political moment, the Deweyan notion of education as a site of collaborative problem-solving (Dewey, 1916/2001) can serve as a guide to avoid limiting professional work to position statements or requests to policymakers. When educational systems are driven by for-profit ventures grounded in narrow

*The term *provocateur* has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes’s welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the “troublemaker” label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson’s, who was fittingly labeled “provocateur.” I can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section. *TSJ*

understandings of teaching and learning in and for a democracy, NCTE has great potential to directly engage with activist work for equity. In this article, we provide a loving critique (Paris & Alim, 2014) of NCTE's definition and enactments of advocacy at a time when neoliberal education reforms limit educators' capacity to carry out our collective responsibilities to marginalized and vulnerable youth.

Inquiring into NCTE's Activism

It is perhaps an open secret why NCTE as an organization does not take firm stands against educational policies that benefit for-profit corporations, such as the privatization of teacher education, high-stakes testing in the K-12 educational system, and the narrowing of the P-16 curriculum (e.g., the exclusion of the arts; for more on this, see Hynds, 2014). The reason, of course, is money. As an organization, NCTE benefits from the status quo, particularly through financial arrangements with sponsors.

Organizations such as NCTE need funding, and membership fees alone cannot cover operations such as conference costs. Yet corporate relationships (e.g., "Diamond-level, Platinum-level, or Gold-level sponsorship" [NCTE, 2018]) compromise NCTE's ability to take a strong stand against the assault on public education, particularly the limitations it places on teachers' and teacher educators' professional agency. The sponsoring levels come with benefits including Annual Convention attendee mailing lists, social media promotion, and logo placements. These corporate relationships also shape our organization's educational politics and professional responses to Pearson's for-profit edTPA™ or ETS's PPAI™.

However, this nationwide collective of English educators grew, quite literally, out of resistance and activism. In 1911, NCTE "was formed primarily out of protest against overly specific college entrance requirements and the effects they were having on high school English education" (n.d.). But how many would argue that protest is the driving force of NCTE today? Certainly, there are, and have been, many actions and stances of which members can be proud: In addition to the activism that was its genesis, NCTE members have critiqued the use of war propaganda in schools in the 1930s (NCTE, 1935), argued for students' right to their own language in the early 1970s (NCTE, 1974), stood for Ethnic Studies in the K-12 curriculum (NCTE, 2015a), affirmed the Black Lives Matter movement (NCTE, 2015b), and denounced racism and white supremacy (NCTE, 2017). These stances ground our deep love for and appreciation of NCTE. Our organization has had moments of putting people, and what is right, before financial concerns: In 2010, our

leadership decided to move our 2012 Annual Convention from Phoenix to Las Vegas in protest of Arizona's anti-immigrant bill S.B. 1070, a move that reportedly cost our organization thousands of dollars (NCTE, 2010).

In contrast, NCTE leadership chose to keep our Annual Convention in St. Louis in 2017 despite widespread debate on this conference location after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People issued a travel advisory for the state of Missouri for African American "travelers, visitors, and Missourians" (NAACP, 2017). Some NCTE members may think the comparison unfair, as the anti-immigrant bill that led to the Convention move from Phoenix came over two years before the conference, whereas the Missouri NAACP travel advisory came just three months prior to the Convention, leaving less time to arrange a new location. Regardless, many people chose not to attend the conference in St. Louis not only because of the decision to remain despite the travel advisory but also because of other critiques of NCTE. Carmen Kynard (2017), explaining why she did not attend NCTE's or CCCC's conferences and does not plan to do so in the future, argued that these organizations and their conferences demonstrate a tokenizing and "bourgeois professionalism." Kynard's words highlight the need for professional organizations to embrace a democratic, activist framework such as that of the Movement for Black Lives, a framework that, as historian Barbara Ransby (2017) notes, "defers to the local wisdom of its members and affiliates, rather than trying to dictate from above." While we, the authors of this article, are White scholars who strive to be allies and accomplices in struggles for justice (Clemens, 2017) but chose to attend the NCTE Annual Convention, we believe that NCTE must respond to Kynard and many others who have raised similar concerns (e.g., Halse Anderson, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2017) by reimagining itself in relationship to members of vulnerable and marginalized communities. Despite its many position statements, NCTE as currently structured steers clear of any sort of meaningful advocacy or activism vis-à-vis for-profit modes of de-professionalization. This inaction makes NCTE members' work supporting students' rights to their own language, Ethnic Studies curricula, or engagement with Black Lives Matter, for example, that much more difficult when their professional organization does nothing to decry efforts pushing teachers to teach, learn, and measure in narrowed or scripted ways.

A reviewer of an earlier draft of this piece wrote that NCTE "had never been a firebrand organization." To the extent that this is true (as mentioned above, NCTE's genesis evidences the founders' desire to protest problematic educational and social policies), we argue that it is time that NCTE becomes one. We applaud the recent statements that describe NCTE

as a more advocacy-focused space but wonder what concrete steps have been taken to make this commitment a reality. Emily Kirkpatrick, the current executive director, stated that her two decades of literacy work have made her “an advocate for teacher agency,” and that her goal is “to give teachers greater voice” (Kirkpatrick, Houser, & Thompson, 2016, p. 13). Susan Houser, a former president of NCTE, similarly sought to make Advocacy Day and month more effective, exploring ways to “really involve local and state groups in that work” (p. 13). But how might NCTE give life to these words and engage in an activism worthy of its position-statement rhetoric? Most importantly, how might NCTE move from *advocacy*, defined as speaking on behalf of another or for a group, to also welcome and support *activism*, defined as acting to bring about social or political change?

While there are limits to what a 501(c)(3) organization can legally engage in (IRS, 2018), far more is needed than the current Policy Analysis Initiative and yearly Advocacy Day (and advocacy month) when NCTE leaders seek to provide guidelines to policymakers. In the current climate, organizations such as NCTE can advocate with and for their members best when they allow themselves to be led by members in explicitly naming and working boldly and persistently against de-professionalization, privatization, and the normalization of acquiescence. This might involve nationwide projects in which NCTE organizes its members around common goals, reimagining what it means to meet for a conference, and valuing educators’ professionalism in ways that facilitate teachers’ response to social injustice. Valuing teacher professionalism can also take the form of cutting affiliations with entities that de-professionalize educators and reconfiguring professional meetings to prioritize members’ engagement in what Freire (1970/2000) claims is the only way “to no longer be prey to [oppression’s] force,” namely, *praxis*—“refl and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). Because, as Freire argued, education cannot be separated from sociopolitical realities (Ollis, 2014), NCTE can support its teacher and teacher educator members by directly engaging these realities, combating the de-professionalization of its members, and creating multiple and powerful spaces for them to participate in not only everyday advocacy but also exceptional activism.

Membership in professional organizations, including NCTE, has been declining in the past decade (Yohn, 2016), and rebranding has been one organizational means to stimulate enrollment. This approach, however, becomes a legitimate response only when organizations complement it with “present[ing] a bold vision of the future . . . and position[ing] themselves as instrumental” in achieving that vision. Many teachers and teacher educators, like other professionals, no longer see the purpose of professional

organizations and prefer to connect through other means, such as social media. While undoubtedly valuable, the 2016 “rebranding” of NCTE (NCTE, 2016), including the redesign of its NCTE website to include more personal stories, is not enough. In fact, the central metaphor of NCTE’s rebranding, “Turning the Page,” is illustrative of this shortcoming: While “turning the page” does suggest a forward movement, it nonetheless remains confined to the written word, moving from one page to another of the same, rather than from a page to action. Featuring “turning the page” prominently in the organization’s rebranding is surely the result of many NCTE leaders’ hard work, which we appreciate. But we propose that NCTE turn the page on its rebranding efforts by helping members get their noses out of the proverbial book and focusing on the work of advocacy and activism. NCTE can revisit its fundamental purposes and determine what it might become in order to be able to respond to pressing needs in the field of English language arts education—energizing, organizing, and growing this community as it speaks out and acts on its commitments.

Below, we offer our thoughts on what it would mean for NCTE to offer our field a “bold vision of the future.” New ways are needed to reenergize, organize, and mobilize NCTE’s members to take action toward equity and justice at the national, glocal, and professional levels. We detail three concrete suggestions about how to reimagine NCTE as an organization that provides opportunities for its members to direct and work toward changes that support embattled teachers and teacher educators. The proposed changes that can, in turn, help NCTE members work with and on behalf of marginalized and vulnerable youth and center the voices of members of color are (1) enacting a nationwide critical media literacy project, (2) strengthening connections to educational activist work with people in our conference cities, and (3) democratically determining our organization’s relationship to the current educational reform movement.

Reimagining NCTE: Three Steps Forward

Nationwide Critical Media Literacy Project

First, we call on NCTE to support a nationwide push around literacy issues in which members share widespread expertise and serve the public good. The first such campaign we suggest focuses on critical media literacy (e.g., Morrell, 2014). By critical media literacy, which we see as distinct from other forms of media literacy, we mean a form of

media literacy [that] involves the politics of representation in which the form and content of media messages are interrogated in order to question

ideology, bias, and the connotations explicit and implicit in the representation . . . [and] to question media representations of race, class, gender, and so on. Beyond simply locating the bias in media, this concept helps [us] recognize the ideological and constructed nature of all communication. (Kellner & Share, 2017, p. 14)

To complement its existing position statements on multimodality in English education and media literacy (e.g., NCTE, 1970, 1975, 1997, 2005, 2008) and to highlight the need for such work at all levels of English education in ways that center the perspectives of people of color and other marginalized individuals who are disproportionately affected by media bias, NCTE can certainly take its usual course of action and create an additional position statement on the need for critical media literacy. Such a statement would be timely, given the partisan political moment in which inconvenient facts or critical points of view are dismissed with terms like “fake news,” overt xenophobia and racism abound, and hate attacks are on the rise (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2017). But NCTE should not stop there.

Position statements have their uses, particularly in terms of throwing the weight of NCTE’s more than 25,000 members behind a particular policy stance or proposal. Creating position statements without accompanying action plans, though, can give the sense that the position statement is the end result of the work and not the beginning. Rather than another position statement to articulate the vision and need for critical media literacy in all classrooms across the nation, we call for the more important task of a collective, national campaign to support this work in classrooms across the country.

Such a campaign might have three dimensions, all of which could be supported by NCTE’s areas of expertise and the strengths of our members: policy, practice, and dialogue. While we agree with some critiques of the Common Core State Standards (e.g., Brass, 2015) and note that these and other standards can be used to support just teaching and learning practice (e.g., Dover, 2016), the NCTE Policy Initiative can do more than make recommendations on standards by encouraging activism that supports marginalized communities’ existing efforts and strengthens the benchmarks for critical media literacy analysis and production.

Beyond this generative use and furthering of policy work, though, is the need to support critical media literacy practice as equity-oriented work in P-16 and teacher education classrooms. As an organization, NCTE has the infrastructure necessary to create and share curricular materials that educators at all levels can adapt or use as starting points as they engage this work. Imagine if ReadWriteThink.org, which currently has 13 curricular resources around critical media literacy (and 53 more general “media

literacy” activities), were used to share scores of critical media literacy analysis and production activities appropriate, as starting points, for every classroom from prekindergarten through graduate school. Imagine if these resources centered the voices and experiences of people who have been and continue to be oppressed—if these resources were used to expose bias, to generate empathy, to create a more equitable world. NCTE could organize teams of volunteers to create these resources, and both encourage and support them in using and sharing them in local spaces across the country. And via NCTE’s Twitter chats, SLAMschool sessions, and face-to-face meetings at its Annual Convention or any of its smaller conferences, members might constructively critique and dialogue about these projects, deepening them and moving the work forward.

Sustained, Sustaining Glocal Relationships

Second, we urge NCTE to engage in sustained and sustaining relationships with glocal community members, particularly members of color, in its host Annual Convention cities. NCTE must take Kynard’s (2017) critique and distrust of symbolic acts “outside the venue of a conference program that is lily white” seriously. While NCTE responded positively to the NCTE17 St. Louis Local Engagement Committee’s call for a Silent March and Take-a-Knee Protest, which emerged as a compromise when they chose not to move the conference location after the NAACP’s travel advisory, there is much more that NCTE can do, beyond symbolic acts, to engage with local communities and both support and engage in activist work.

During the Silent March in St. Louis, we began to wonder: What if, instead of a brief symbolic march with local educators and activists, NCTE reimagined the Annual Convention as the culminating event of a yearlong dialogue with educators and activists in the host city? In an age when information can be disseminated and dialogue can be sustained easily and from afar using new literacies and technologies, NCTE could make it more worthwhile to travel to a particular site by making the conference location more central to the glocal themes and issues in the host city. We began to imagine yearlong dialogues with educators in Houston, Baltimore, Denver, and Louisville, each before the conference, and culminating in some form of direct action chosen by local members in these cities, seeking always to center the voices of members of color. These dialogues might serve the purpose of educating NCTE’s membership about how national issues that affect education and opportunity unfold in particular cities, and the coming-together of thousands of English educators from across the nation could

serve to bring attention to activist work and how particular issues play out in specific locales.

We imagined how powerful it would be if the entire conference had only one activity—or one set of multiple interconnected activities—on, say, the Saturday afternoon of the Annual Convention. Everyone—NCTE members from all groups and assemblies—could join together to learn from and support local educators and activists; participate, from multiple perspectives and localities, in work that they identify as needed; and shine a national spotlight on the issues most important to those in the city hosting us. As we write, teacher strikes and protests are spreading from West Virginia and Oklahoma to Colorado, Arizona, and Puerto Rico. Imagine if the Saturday afternoon of the Annual Convention were dedicated to dialogues and presentations about issues local educators found urgent (and perhaps relating to the conditions that have catalyzed this recent teacher activism). During this time, presentations by members of NCTE could take place in a context beyond the conference center, in dialogue with these fellow educators and activists working in the host city and moving away from scholarship practices that can make people in some communities feel “overresearched yet, ironically, made invisible” (Tuck, 2009, pp. 411–412). NCTE members often practice responsiveness to people or local conditions in community-engaged scholarship and teacher education (e.g., Baker-Bell, 2013; Butler, 2017; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017); this would be a way for the organization to practice responsiveness on a broad scale.

Becoming a More Democratic Professional Organization

Finally, we ask NCTE to become a more democratic professional organization in two major ways. First, we ask NCTE to democratically determine its policies, including and especially its relationships with corporate interests that are often at odds with its member-driven position statements and other articulated values. Gary Anderson (2017) argues:

Unless education researchers take being politically relevant more seriously, we will sit on the sidelines as our public schools are privatized and become profit centers for edubusinesses. It won't be easy. There are important trade-offs in legitimacy, time commitments, and risk-assessment for non-tenured faculty. But extreme times require extreme solutions. The good news is that we are starting to have this conversation in earnest. (p. 1011)

While it is good to have earnest conversations, it is time to take concrete steps to democratically reimagine NCTE's role in the current educational reform movement. The concern about responsiveness to members' profes-

sional needs has been raised many times. Leslie Burns (2007) claimed that unreasonableness is necessary for positive change and highlighted the ways that NCTE has remained reasonable to its detriment, accepting problematic policy shifts and framings. Jory Brass (2018) revisited James Moffett's (1972) fierce rejection of educational accountability measures to demonstrate how far from its ideals NCTE has moved. NCTE's neutral stance and active relationships with corporate profiteers involved in the radical shifting of the educational landscape have deepened the divide between the organization and its democratically produced position statements as well as with members' professional commitments and responsibilities. For this reason, we are not once again calling for a "conversation" but urgently calling for a dramatic reprioritization of democratic process in NCTE. What might such a process require? Author and 2017 Annual Convention keynote speaker Jacqueline Woodson called for NCTE to become more diverse (Lehman, 2017). To do this, NCTE needs to continue and strengthen programs such as Cultivating New Voices to amplify the work and contributions of people of color, and not only when they're new to the profession, in the primarily White space of NCTE. Similar programs can support others who may be marginalized in NCTE. Beyond expanding these existing programs, we imagine several new possibilities for greater democracy and participation, including increased transparency about what rationales have led to NCTE's current relationships, member voting on whether and how to continue these relationships, new bylaws requiring NCTE's leadership to be responsive and accountable to its membership, and democratically elected executive directors from within the organization.

Second, we ask NCTE to become a more democratic professional organization by creating time during its conferences for members to engage in activist working groups in which they consult with NCTE policy experts to create and implement plans on pressing issues in particular areas of English language arts education. Such a change—in structure as well as in budget—aligns with what former NCTE executive director Kent Williamson used to say: that NCTE needed to change its approach from what members *get* to what they *get to do*. But this change is about much more than that. Teachers and teacher educators are often frustrated about their lack of say in policies and structures that adversely affect professional work, students, and communities. Teachers and teacher educators are often and in equal parts angry about harmful policies and structures, busy caring for students, and fearful of many physical and systemic forms of violence. We imagine that NCTE members do not want to pay membership fees just to experience similar kinds of silencing in a national organization that they are experienc-

ing in their local schools. Although it is difficult to find time or space to do so, teachers and teacher educators are looking for ways to use their voices to connect and to make change that matters and in ways that they can feel safe and supported. At a time when teacher shortages frequently appear in the news and the number of education majors has plummeted (Flannery, 2016), NCTE activist working groups can provide a nationwide sense of community, momentum, and structure that can help teachers and teacher educators empower themselves and strengthen their agency as professionals (e.g., Slocum, Hathaway, & Bernstein, 2018). One function of such groups could involve creating and implementing timeline-based action plans to meet the objectives outlined in recent NCTE position statements or resolutions. While such documents have been approved by the membership, no mechanism currently holds the organization accountable to meeting these documents' objectives or ensures that member-generated position statements truly guide the organization's actions. For example, although the Resolution Opposing High-Stakes Teacher Candidate Performance Assessments (NCTE, 2017) resolved that NCTE "strongly oppose legislation mandating the requirement that candidates pass high-stakes teacher performance assessments as a requirement for licensure," no action has yet accompanied this resolution.

Conclusion

When NCTE and organizations like it build stronger, more diverse coalitions, they can more powerfully extol the virtue of public education as a common good and name and combat the privatization of schooling in its many forms. Advocacy in NCTE can be reinvented through a refusal to normalize acquiescence. With school resource inequities deepening, school resegregation continuing to grow, teachers being villainized, and educational profiteering soaring, teachers and teacher educators can no longer settle for merely having a seat at the table. Teachers and teacher educators need professional organizations to get experienced public school teachers elected to public office, to reexamine and adjust partnerships as necessary, to pursue only those partnerships approved by members in accordance with equity- and justice-oriented values, and not only to vote with our collective dollars but also to withhold our dollars collectively. If these activities are not possible within current organizational structures, then NCTE members need to change those structures.

Beyond suggestions to policymakers, teachers and teacher educators need organizations that activate members to work at local, state, and national levels toward equitable education. Professional teachers' organizations

should not be contributing, in any way, to the de-professionalization of their members. When such organizations refuse to take a strong stand against educator de-professionalization, they eschew analysis of deep inequities, and they pitch and profit from products that ultimately both deepen these inequities and diminish teachers' ability to carry out their professional responsibilities and ideals.

We look forward to a time when NCTE's statements on advocacy, teachers' stories, or teachers' voices translate into action and sustained activism and become central to NCTE's mission and its members' work in and from the organization. We look forward to a time when NCTE is overtly involved with ongoing activism around and critiques of oppressive or inequitable realities. We look forward to a much more diverse NCTE that works for the social and political change necessary for equitable education and human rights. What if NCTE followed its position statement in support of Black Lives Matter with the harder work of aligning with and learning from this member-led democratic movement? This sort of transformation would be no small task, but its rewards could be immeasurable. Nancy Prichard, a former assistant secretary to NCTE, wrote the following in dialogue with Ernece Kelly, the founder of the NCTE Task Force on Race and Bias: "If changes for the better have taken place, it has been because of pressure, and it seems to me that now is the time to push harder, keep up the talk and action, not relax" (1970). We hope that all of us in this organization we love will push harder, keep up the talk and action, and not relax.

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