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Donna Risolo

The Paradox of Power

The LEARN Act, (Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation Act) a federal policy still being debated in congress, proposes to provide \$2.35 billion for the development of comprehensive literacy programs for children from birth to grade twelve, with an unprecedented \$9,000,000 earmarked for adolescent literacy programs. Hailed by education organization leaders, including Kent Williamson, Executive Director of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), as a landmark bill that will bring much needed dollars to address the literacy needs of children in our nation, the LEARN Act has also been criticized by prominent members in the NCTE community who see compromises in the bill that they believe violate literacy instructional theories and practices advocated by NCTE (Goodman, 2009; Krashen, 2009a, 2009b; Lutenbacher, 2010; Ohanian, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Toll, 2009). In particular, literacy researchers and popular bloggers such as Susan Ohanian and Stephen Krashen charge that by supporting the LEARN Act, NCTE is violating its own publicly articulated position on literacy development and the best practices that support that development. Additionally, critics characterize NCTE's willingness to collaborate in the process of federal policymaking as feasting on "rotten food" being served at the "poisoned table" in Washington (Lutenbacher, 2009; Ohanian 2009a, 2010a, 2010c).

However, a closer analysis of the language in the LEARN Act shows that NCTE's support for the bill is in keeping with several of the organization's tenets on best practices. Additionally, using data pulled from interviews with key policymakers from within the organization, as well as a critical discourse analysis of the process of federal policy-making and of NCTE participation in that process, I present a more complete understanding of how federal policy is made in Washington DC. This understanding challenges the characterization of NCTE's policy activity as "feasting on poisoned food at the policy table" advanced by its critics, a characterization that inaccurately assumes that power in Washington, DC operates within a win-lose binary. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1980) theory that all uses of language are political in that they attempt to broker power, as well as more recent theories that posit policymaking as a process of considering multiple perspectives, I explain how NCTE's recent influence on federal policy is the result of the organization employing post-modern pragmatic discourse practices marked by flexibility in behavior, tolerance in attitude, and conciseness in message.

NCTE Remakes Itself in the New Political Climate

There was a time when many in the field of education were hoping that the No Child Left Behind Act was just a phase that would pass away with the changing political tides. Today, most in the field has come to accept that federal involvement in education is here to stay, and that we teachers, not

only as individual practitioners but also as a collective group of professionals, must engage the policies of NCLB head on. This increasing federal involvement in education has not only brought changes directly to the classroom, but has also prompted traditional teacher organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English to respond in a new way.

Prior to the aggressive federal policies enacted by NCLB in 2002 that ushered in a new era of government control over classroom practices, NCTE primarily directed its policy recommendations to those who made policy: teachers, English department leaders, school administrators, professors and other boots-on-the-ground stakeholders. The No Child Left Behind Act and its successor policy, Race to the Top, is changing all that. No longer can teacher organizations stay outside the conversation in Washington, hoping to affect change through the promotion of research in their journals and published books. Washington is fast becoming the intermediate through which teacher organizations must pass if they want to have broad impact on classroom practice, as federal policies are increasingly determining what happens in the classroom.

To quote NCTE Executive Director, Kent Williamson (personal communication, December 6, 2009), "our work is changing." In a world where Twitter has supplanted blogs, a new mode of conversation is taking place; in order for teacher organizations to be a part of this conversation, they are adopting new discourse practices that, in the case of NCTE, are reshaping their political identity and having impact on policy. In order to make this transition in its discourse practices, NCTE first had to shift its understanding of how power operates in Washington, and thereby come to new understandings regarding how to participate in the policymaking process.

From Modern to Postmodern Conceptualization of Power

In the early years of NCLB, NCTE was very much an outsider—a consillium non grata—operating on the margins of the education polity in Washington. This was partly due to Washington's systematic exclusion of teacher organizations. "We were definitely outside the realms of influence and policy through 01, 02, 03, and we kept knocking on the door . . . but basically we weren't really in a position to influence policies very much," recalls Kent Williamson (personal communication, December 6, 2009). However, NCTE's discourse practices at that time also reinforced its outsider status in DC. First, NCTE was primarily creating documents for its own members, thus speaking an academic discourse that is inaccessible in Washington. Second, like most teacher organizations, NCTE was espousing an anti-federal government discourse. An oppositional mindset of "Us v. Them" cast Washington as the powerful Goliath against which teacher organizations must rail like David. This sentiment was echoed by Laura Robb, an NCTE Reading Commission member, when asked about the political context in which the 2003 policy document *A Call to Action* was pro-

duced “It’s very difficult, the [Reading] Commission—we come out with an idea, but we’re competing with the government and that’s a very big competition. We don’t have the leverage or the bully pulpit the government has” (Laura Robb, personal communication, November 22, 2009). While creating policy positions was acceptable, playing politics with Washington

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was scorned by many in the field of education. Again, Robb states: “I don’t think we had a political agenda. I mean our agenda was just totally adolescent literacy. We didn’t really get into the politics. If you get into the politics, you’re compromising for the wrong reason” (personal communication, November 22, 2009). At the be-

ginning of the decade many in the field of education still adhered to a modernist conception of Washington DC as a powerful monolith. Such oppositional discourse of anti-politics created a self-fulfilling prophecy that relegated NCTE to an outsider status.

But when NCTE adjusted its vision to view Washington through what I call a postmodern lens, they were able to see that power exists in the process of negotiating differences. Michel Foucault (1980) describes the process of negotiating power as a “net-like organization” in which power players circulate, each jockeying for position (p. 98), and Norman Fairclough (1995) describes policy texts as mediated products of negotiated power relations. From this perspective, playing politics is less about shifting between the binary of winning and losing, and more about the merging of multiple ideas to create hybrid policies. NCTE’s Washington office director, Barbara Cambridge describes this new perspective: “I’m finding as you build relationships [in Washington] and show that you are capable of learning and what your expertise is, then you can have a good relationship [with policymakers in Washington]” (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Cambridge’s language suggests a growing understanding by the organization of the workings of the *polity*—the dynamic relationship among the various stakeholders in Washington DC: the executive office, legislators, courts, appointed officials, special interests groups, unions, journalists, think tank experts, and all the other stakeholders who participate in the policymaking process in some form or another (Henig, 2007).

While the image of politicians engaged in passionate arguments over federal policy looms large in the public consciousness, the actual process of policymaking can be far less polemic. The multiple and competing ideologies swirling around one particular policy issue require that all stakeholders ap-

proach the process of policymaking with tolerance for diverse opinions and an attitude of friendly competition. If an education organization such as NCTE, with an espoused mission of working toward the greater good for society, presents itself as intolerant of competing ideas, it will most likely be branded too partisan and, thereby, be left out of the conversation. Policymakers look to education organizations for credible research and clarification on theoretical perspectives that can help inform the policy conversation on the hill. As policy scholars Frederick Hess and Jeffrey Henig (2008) argue, the goal of sharing education research with federal policymakers is not to present the hegemonic solution to a given social problem, but the goal of policy recommendations is to encourage policymakers to think more critically about the social problems for which they are creating solutions: “Scholarship’s greatest value is not the ability to end policy disputes, but to encourage more thoughtful, disciplined, and tempered debate” (p. 1). Predecessor to Hess and Henig, Carol Weiss (1982) writes: “Rarely does research supply one answer that policy actors employ to solve a policy problem. Rather, research provides a background of data, empirical generalizations, and ideas that affect the way that policymakers think about problems” (p. 621). Thus, from this perspective, the inflexibility of a modern oppositional approach to power, one in which NCTE would try to enforce a hegemonic agenda, gave way to an open-minded, flexible postmodern pragmatic engagement with power. By mid-decade, armed with a new discourse and a new postmodern attitude toward the policymaking process, NCTE would begin taking on a more flexible pragmatic identity.

A Place at the Policy Table is not a Bad Place to Be

One of the goals of NCTE is to protect, as Executive Director, Kent Williamson phrases it, “the decision making space of” English teachers and teachers of language arts (personal communication, December 6, 2009). The organization’s moniker, National Council of Teachers of English, unmistakably communicates this facet of the organization’s commitment. For this reason, Washington has long regarded teacher organizations such as NCTE as one-sided partisans, only concerned with protecting the interests of their members. Combine that perception with the scholarly discourse that NCTE was employing during the early part of the decade, plus the penchant for polemic debate, and you have a formula for being ignored by federal policymakers. Through the development of new medium for conveying their policy positions—shorter, more succinct policy documents, NCTE was able to find that “external voice” (Kent Williamson, personal communication, December 6, 2009) that would help create a new identity for the organization in Washington. But changing the medium through which NCTE communicates its policy positions was only the first step toward reshaping NCTE’s political identity in Washington. A shift in NCTE’s identity from a partisan outsider to an “expert in the field” (Barbara Cambridge, personal communication, November 22, 2009) eventually came about through the organization’s dynamic participation in the discourse community in Washington, which required not only a change in language but also a change in behavior.

To be regarded as a trusted partner in the policymaking process, NCTE has to be willing to engage fully with the act of making policy as it is happening—a process that requires that all stakeholder come to the table in a spirit of friendly competition:

You have to make it clear you're open to being called on to clarify terms . . . During the course of the LEARN Bill, I can't tell you how many times I got calls in the evening from staffers trying to work, asking me [to clarify a point in our policy recommendation documents]...NCTE Washington began building relationships that helped define the organization as a trusted partner: We have a presence in Washington now that we didn't have before. And part of having influence on people is gaining their trust, [sharing] what you're up to, [showing] that you want a relationship with them, and that you will respect their points of view as well. Part of the office's responsibility is to define ourselves, but also to learn about others, so we do a lot of relationship building. (Barbara Cambridge, personal communication, November 22, 2009)

Far from the oppositional discourse of the past that pitted NCTE against the powers-that-be in Washington, Cambridge creates a new identity for NCTE by engaging in a discourse community that values give-and-take, a willingness to share and learn, and respect for multiple points of view, the type of “thoughtful, disciplined and tempered debate” recommended by Hess and Henig (2008). Through the relationship building process, NCTE has replaced its former identity as a partisan teacher organization with an identity as a credible expert in the field: “We're certainly having much more credibility on the hill than ever before, because we are sources of information; we're seen as having some expertise in the field” (Barbara Cambridge, personal communication, November 22, 2009).

Through such pragmatic changes in discourse practices, NCTE has been able to rebrand itself as a partner in the enterprise of education problem solving in Washington. Having its hand in crafting the language of key legislation, NCTE is now a significant part of the conversation on literacy education in D.C.

NCTE's Impact on Federal Education Policy

Since the opening of the NCTE Washington office in 2004, the organization's lobbying efforts have resulted in several concrete changes to federal legislation. Beginning in 2007, NCTE's efforts, in consort with those of other education organizations, resulted in bringing attention to the importance of using multiple assessments and growth models when measuring a school's Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) beyond the reliance on standardized test scores. As a result, the reauthorization of NCLB in 2007 included allowing states more flexibility to use growth models and multiple assessments to measure performance.

In that same year, NCTE collaborated on a bi-partisan effort to craft and pass the Striving Readers Act (2007), a policy that sought to improve literacy education for middle and high school students whose literacy development needs had not

garnered the same attention and support in the form of federal funding as had those of elementary school children through the heavily funded Reading First Programs. The Striving Readers Act included some of the NCTE tenets on literacy education that had been published that same year in *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform: A Policy Research Brief*, such as the connection between reading, thinking, creativity, and innovation and the importance of literacy coaches to improve the acquisition of content area literacy for adolescents.

NCTE's work on the Striving Readers Act resulted in an important change in language: “scientifically based research” was replaced by “scientifically valid research” in the Striving Readers documents. The former sanctioned a very limited notion of what counted as valid research methodology in the field of education, quantitative studies, to the exclusion of qualitative methods of research in the field. NCTE borrowed credibility from the prestigious and non-partisan National Research Council's (NRC) definition of valid research practice to argue for broadening the definition of education research in federal legislative documents. NRC's definition includes “empirical investigations” grounded in a “relevant theoretical frame” and endorses the use of “a variety of methodological approaches” with a “coherent and explicit” chain of reasoning and “detailed description of procedures, limitations and biases, errors and counter-explanations.” Armed with the NRC definition, NCTE successfully pressed for this important change in language in the Striving Readers Act—a change that opened up meaningful dialogue in Washington about the definition of valid research in the field of education, a dialogue that continued to have resonances during the reauthorization conversation in 2010.

NCTE's more recent lobbying efforts have had a direct impact on the LEARN Act. Though by no means not the only stakeholder in literacy education influencing the contents of the LEARN Act, NCTE had prominent influence on drafting of parts of the bill. Now viewed by federal policymakers as trusted experts in the field of literacy education, NCTE was sought out by the architects of the bill. As a result, several of NCTE's principles on literacy education were highlighted in LEARN. For example, the bill makes clear that comprehensive literacy development requires more than the basic ability to decode and comprehend texts but includes, as the bill states, a recognition that literacy development “is an ongoing process” and that “writing leads to improved reading achievement, and reading leads to better writing performance, and combined instruction leads to improvements in both areas” (LEARN Act, 2009). These two tenets of literacy development—that literacy is an on-going, developmental process and the result of the interaction between the reading and writing processes—were communicated in both NCTE's policy documents, *A Call to Action* (2003) and *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy*

From this perspective, playing politics is less about shifting between the binary of winning and losing, and more about the merging of multiple ideas to create hybrid policies.

Reform (2006), as well as the NCTE 2009 Legislative Platform. Kent Williamson attributes the inclusion of the reciprocal relationship between the reading and writing process in the LEARN Act directly to NCTE's efforts to educate Washington policymakers on this point: "The side-by-side inclusion of writing and reading as inseparable literacy skills from the earliest stages of pre-K through high school in the LEARN Act is definitely attributable to our effort to make the point that had become a forgotten point in Washington" (personal communication, December 6, 2009). NCTE pressed the point with such vigor that

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Barbara Cambridge jokingly became known as the "writing nag" among other literacy policy stakeholders in Washington (Barbara Cambridge, November 22, 2009), a persona that served NCTE well, as its definition of literacy as a complex interaction of the processes of reading, writing, thinking and speaking is now on its way to being codified as federal policy through the language of the LEARN Act.

Prior to the lobbying efforts of NCTE, the common definition of literacy development in Washington was still limited to the teaching of phonics in the early grades. The importance of such a change in the understanding of literacy as a "process" has significant implications; this change in language, a change for which NCTE led the charge, has the potential to bring about an entire paradigm shift in the literacy instructional practices supported by federal policies.

Another significant effect that NCTE had on the LEARN Act is the definition of professional development as "job-embedded and ongoing, based on scientifically valid research," understandings of professional development that NCTE introduced to Washington through its policy document, *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform* (2006). The LEARN Act states that professional development funded by the bill must be "sustained, intensive and classroom focused, and is not limited to a 1-day or short term workshop or conference." (LEARN Act, 2009, p. 25). As Kent Williamson recalls, job-embedded professional development "was something [NCTE Washington] talked about at every meeting" (personal communication, December 6, 2009) and successfully lobbied for its inclusion in both the House and Senate versions of the bill.

Policymaking Requires Tolerance for a Plurality of Perspectives

The most vociferous critic of NCTE policy activity is Susan Ohanian, a longstanding member of the organization. A popular voice on the NCTE's Connected Community and a prolific blogger (see susanohanian.org), Ohanian employs the rhetorical style of the modern political activists to assail the policy activity of NCTE as unethical and unscholarly. Through an amalgam of rhetorical strategies, Ohanian argues that federal education policy promotes teaching practices that are professionally "soul" numbing for teachers and places the students in

educational "indentured servitude." Ohanian waxes passionately on the safety of the "souls" of both teachers and students at the hands of politicians and the "Standardistos" who, she argues, promote a fascist education "corporate-politico" agenda in which organizations, such as NCTE, IRA, ASCD, NEA and AFT are culpable co-conspirators – an association Ohanian claims in her article, "On Assessment, Accountability, and Other Things that Go Bump in the Night" published in the NCTE journal, *Language Arts* (2009b). And, in "Evidence-Based Practice, Best Practices, and Other Lies," (2010b) Ohanian's depiction of NCTE's support for the LEARN Act suggests that NCTE is advocating for "explicit" instruction, a mode of instruction that is not consistent with the whole language approach to literacy education advanced by the organization. Additionally, Ohanian suggests that NCTE's interest in the LEARN Act is motivated by the financial gain it hopes to receive as a provider of professional development services (2010b), as she exhorts her readers to follow the money trail (2010b).

However, participating in the process of creating a federal policy does not mean that one is necessarily embedded, as Ohanian (2010a) characterizes NCTE, with the totality of that particular policy. Contrary to the common perception of policymaking as a duel between partisan gladiators battling for a winner-take-all outcome, the reality of policymaking is far less contentious, and requires that one come to the table in the spirit of friendly competition, and be willing to tolerate differences in order to have one's voice heard. In particular, education policymaking in Washington has undergone a drastic shift in the past decade, as Carl Kaestle (2007) describes: "The polity has numerous points of entry and provides strategic opportunities. Instead of policy monopolies and iron triangles, the education polity is increasingly characterized by multiple policy venues, issues networks, and shifting alliances" (p. 34). For example, several education organizations with competing theoretical and methodological perspectives lobbied, in democratic fashion, to have their voices represented in the LEARN Act. Thus, that there are some teaching practices advanced by the LEARN Act that do not accord with NCTE's position on teaching literacy is not only expected, it is the outcome of living in an increasingly pluralistic society in which a representative government attempts to address the interests of many, not just a few – a democratic process that NCTE's critics seem to have confused with fascism. NCTE decided to support the LEARN Act, despite the "explicit instruction" inclusion, because there are numerous teaching and learning practices advanced by the bill that do indeed accord with NCTE principles of teaching and learning.

What the LEARN Act Actually Says

The LEARN Act does include references to "explicit instruction;" however, there are also numerous educational practices included in the bill that are consistent with NCTE's policies, values, and beliefs. For example, while the language of the LEARN Act does include a definition of the "characteristics of effective literacy instruction" for grades 4 – 12 as "direct and explicit comprehension instruction" (Section 4, b, 1, C. ii), the remainder of this section of the bill also defines "effective literacy instruction" for 4-12 learners in the following

ways, all ways that are consistent with NCTE publicly stated positions on effective literacy instruction:

- Making available and using diverse texts at the reading, development, and interest level of the students (Section 4, b, 1, C. iv)
- Providing multiple opportunities for students to write with clear purposes and critical reasoning appropriate to the topic and purpose and with specific instruction and feedback from teachers and peers (Section 4, b, 1, C. v)
- Using differentiated instructional approaches (Section 4, b, 1, C. vi)
- Using strategies to enhance students (Section 4, b, 1, C. vii), I. motivation to read and write II. engagement in self-directed learning
- Providing text-based learning across content areas (Section 4, b, 1, C. x)
- Providing instruction in the uses of technology and multimedia resources for classroom research and for generating and presenting content and ideas (Section 4, b, 1, C. x)
- Coordinating the involvement of families and caregivers to the extent feasible and appropriate as determined by the Secretary, to improve reading, writing, and academic achievement (Section 4, b, 1, C. xii)
- Coordinating the involvement of library media specialists, teachers, principals, other school leaders, teacher literacy teams, and English as a second language specialists as appropriate, that analyze student work and plan or deliver instruction over time (Section 4, b, 1, C. xiii)

These are just a few of the numerous references in the LEARN Act to teaching and professional development practices that accord with NCTE positions that are communicated through its statements of core values and bedrock beliefs, as well as through its policy statements, policy agendas, and other public documents. In fact, the language of many such statements within the LEARN Act accord in some cases verbatim with that of NCTE documents. Therefore, contrary to the suggestions made by Ohanian (2010b, 2010c) and Stephen Krashen (2009a, 2009b), that the LEARN Act is prescriptively and solely advancing explicit instructional approaches to teaching literacy, the LEARN Act includes numerous principles on teaching and learning that accord with practices and positions advocated by NCTE and respected literacy scholars, upon whose research NCTE's policy positions are based.

Federal Education Policy Can "Do Good"

In no way am I an apologist for fraudulent or overly prescriptive federal policies, such as Reading First, which was fraught with problems from its inception due to its promotion of a nationwide one-size fits all approach to reading instruction and the misappropriation of federal monies toward a select few publishing companies endorsed by the federal government. What I am arguing for is a new perspective on federal education policy even in the face of the numerous burdens that some NCLB policies have placed on teachers and students.

If we remember back to a time before NCLB, we may recall

that several federal education policies have brought positive changes to the educational enterprise in the past fifty years. For example, since 1965 Head Start has provided tens of millions of children in poverty a pre-school education that they otherwise would have been without. Since 1975, IDEA, (originally The Education for All Handicapped Children Act), through its mandates and sanctions, has provided innovative, equitable, and dignified educational opportunities to countless disabled students. And for over forty years, the federal TRIO program, which includes the successful Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services programs, has provided individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with the support they need to fulfill the dream of earning a college education.

Given these examples of successful federal education policies, I ask rhetorically: Is it not possible to conceive of a federal policy that could have a positive impact on literacy practices? And, would not we, English teachers and teacher educators, want to have a hand in shaping such a policy? And finally, if the LEARN Act were to pass and monies became available to support "high quality professional development," would we not want a trusted teacher organization such as NCTE to deliver such programs?

The Paradox of Power

NCTE's recent experience with policymaking suggests that power in Washington, DC exists in the process of negotiating differences. Playing politics in Washington is less about shifting between the binary of winning and losing and more about the merging of multiple ideas to create what I call hybrid policies. As education policy scholar Jeffrey Henig (2009) observes policy issues that are not highly contested, "[m]uch of the day-to-day policymaking and implementation takes place in a less contentious environment" (p. 8). However, literacy can indeed be highly contested. Yet the results of this study suggest that those who successfully negotiate power, even over a hot-button issue such as adolescent literacy, are those who are best able to negotiate differences, even while pressing for their agenda. The modernist concept of power as inflexible and oppositional is less accurate a description of today's policymaking process.

While the solution to education problems is still and will always be highly contested, I argue that political power is best exercised in a postmodern space of open-mindedness and flexibility, akin to the "thoughtful, disciplined, and tempered debate" advocated by Hess and Henig (2008). Contrary to the claim that the process of policymaking as consensus building is a thing of the past (Olssen, et al., 2004), NCTE's experience in Washington lends credence to the notion that the negotiation of power at least with regard to education policy is still essentially a democratic process, in that multiple voices with competing agendas are given a platform to espouse their views. And ironically, those who seek hegemonic control, or make that seeking most obvious, are left out of the process of negotiating power in Washington, DC.

Had NCTE taken an oppositional stance and insisted on hegemonic dominance of its policy position, as its critics would have it do, the organization would have continued to be left out of any conversation in Washington, letting other more sav-

vy stakeholders move in to forward their agenda. Instead, NCTE made pragmatic shifts toward what I describe as post-modern discourse practices that require flexibility in behavior, tolerance in attitude, and conciseness in message. Thus, ironically, the organization was able to forward its solutions to the social problem of adolescent literacy by not forwarding itself as having the definitive and singular solution to that problem. Such behavior has enabled NCTE to gradually shift its political identity in Washington, DC from a partisan outsider to an "expert in the field." Rather than seek hegemonic dominance, NCTE garnered power by joining the discourse community in Washington, and in so doing, the organization is now able to have meaningful impact on federal policy.

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