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## Contentious Conversations

#### Abstract

The idea of joining a conversation through reading and writing is not new; in his 1941 book "The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action," Kenneth Burke suggests that the acts of reading and writing are like entering a parlor where others are already conversing. The author explores the place of professional debate within NCTE and in the pages of "English Journal". Regardless, by reading these pages, one is entering into a conversation that is already underway.

#### Keywords

English, discourse communities, persuasive discourse, debate, professional development, professional education, grammar, language usage, writing for publication, academic discourse, higher education

#### Disciplines

Creative Writing | Educational Psychology | English Language and Literature | Higher Education and Teaching | Teacher Education and Professional Development

#### Comments

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# Contentious Conversations

The author explores the place of professional debate within NCTE and in the pages of English Journal.

t's raining and cold. But you have stepped indoors, and you stand at the door of a room where a fire is blazing, the drinks are flowing, and

friends, acquaintances, and intriguing strangers are laughing and talking cheerfully. They beckon you to join them, and soon enough, you are part of the conversation.

This scene could serve as an analogy for what we do as readers and writers in "rooms" such as *English Journal (EJ)*. Perhaps you have been a longtime reader, or maybe this is your first encounter with *EJ*. Regardless, by reading these pages, you are entering into a conversation that is already underway. But is the discussion here really like the scene I have portrayed?

#### Joining the Conversation

The idea of joining a conversation through reading and writing is not new; in his 1941 book *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action,* Kenneth Burke suggests that the acts of reading and writing are like entering a parlor where others are already conversing. This sounds pleasant enough, but the picture I have drawn for you is not the way that Burke colors the scene. Keep the image of the parlor, and, yes, everyone there is talking. But:

> they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. (110)

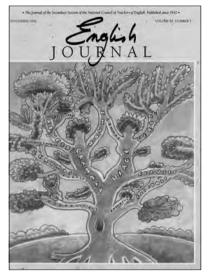
Is a heated discussion the kind of conversation you would like to enter? Is it the kind of conversation that unfolds within each new issue of EJ? Is it what you should expect to see from English teachers attending the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, or in the online discussion forums?

Well, no. And yes. It depends on what you mean by "heated discussion." It is unlikely that you will encounter many shouting matches among English teachers, either here in these pages, in person at the Annual Convention, or online. But I am happy to report that if you mingle with the NCTE crowd for much time at all, you will certainly stumble into some contentious conversations, and perhaps you will even join the fray.

#### The Professional Debate

My enthusiasm for professional conflict may surprise some and alarm others. Since it is not true that I love argument for its own sake, let me explain why I value our heated discussions so much. When my first copy of *EJ* arrived in November 1996, I was a beginner who was struggling to find an effective way to teach grammar, so I was thrilled to see an entire issue devoted to grammar instruction. It felt as though I was holding in my hands The Answer Manual for life's teaching questions. I was ready to enact every one of those answers, so it was a surprise when I actually opened the journal and discovered that it was not a how-to manual. The issue theme was there in capitals at the top of the table of contents: "THE GREAT

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The teaching of grammar and usage has long been a point of contention in the field, as this 1996 issue of *English Journal* edited by Leila Christenbury illustrates.

## DEBATE (AGAIN): TEACHING GRAMMAR AND USAGE."

I felt disappointed. A debate? Finding answers to my questions was not going to be as simple as I had thought. But then I began reading, and my dis-

We have the capacity to truly welcome and learn from/with dissenting voices—both in the short term and over the long term. appointment was eclipsed by curiosity about what the authors were debating and what I might learn about teaching grammar from watching them lay out their best arguments. In retrospect, that November 1996 issue, edited by Leila Christenbury, was much more

valuable to me than a how-to manual. Because of the diverse perspectives represented in those pages, I came to a new understanding about the complexities of grammar instruction, and rather than following someone else's teaching script, I learned to ask better questions and more thoughtfully explore what it means to teach and learn grammar.

Being privy to professional debates is good not only for individual English teachers, but also for us as a field. In our best moments, we welcome debate. When *EJ* editor Ben Nelms published Karen Jost's incendiary "Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write" in 1990, he characterized the piece as "a rebuttal not to any specific previous article but to the tenor of a number of recent *EJ* articles as well as the editorial stance of the present and previous editors" (65). Rather than silencing a dissenting voice, Nelms put Jost's piece before readers (and a follow-up missive, too!), and he invited response. The result? What Nelms described later, in 1991, as an "avalanche" of responses—"lively, thoughtful, and well written—an outpouring of genuine professional concern" (78).

Jost's dissenting voice forced us as a field to seek clarity about what we believe, know, and do. Although 20 years have since passed, her rebuttal plays a continuing role in sparking our thinking about teachers as writers. It is a piece that still appears somewhat frequently in professional conversations and writing, and its continuing presence in our discussions says something special about NCTE. We have the capacity to truly welcome and learn from/with dissenting voices—both in the short term and over the long term.

#### The Debate Today

As I write this piece, our field's contentious conversations continue. Recently, there has been heated discussion about grammar. In her July 2010 letter to the *EJ* editor, Martha Kolln takes to task editor Ken Lindblom for the framing of the call for manuscripts for the "Beyond Grammar" (March 2011) issue. Then Kolln brings out her fightin' words. She suggests that for the past 40 years, schools have "denied the study of grammar a place in the K–12 curriculum" (12–13)—a problem that she traces specifically to the work of Constance Weaver and more generally to NCTE publications and conferences.

Perhaps you are not yet familiar with Kolln's and Weaver's distinctive approaches to grammar pedagogy. However, these names mean a great deal to me, as these individuals authored the two lead pieces in the November 1996 *EJ*—the issue that really got me thinking about what it means to teach grammar. I have since learned a great deal from *both* of these grammar giants' books and articles. So I am again faced with a dilemma: Who is right, Kolln or Weaver?

Once again, I find that there are no easy answers to my grammar questions. And once again, dissenting voices in EJ require me to think hard about what it means to teach and learn the English language arts. I am having to figure out for myself what it might mean if *both* Kolln and Weaver are right. I trust that others, too, are doing some of these same mental gymnastics, and that some of us will put our ideas forward here in EJ. There will be some disagreement, perhaps even some heated discussion. If we can be smart and civil while letting the conflicts play out, we will help each other to hone our thinking. And if we do that, everybody wins.

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## Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or if you'd like to see NCTE take a stand on a position you support, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention.

For further details on submitting a resolution, to see resolutions already passed by Council members, or to learn about proposing position statements or guidelines other than resolutions, visit the NCTE website (http://www.ncte.org/positions/call\_for\_resolutions) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; lbianchini@ncte.org). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2011.** 

### NCTE 90 YEARS AGO

#### From English Journal:

The Council has an honorable history and has attained to a good reputation. It must, however, not rest upon its laurels. There is an abundance of work pressing to be done. There is, first of all, the problem of aims. What is English? Upon a clear and definite answer to that question depend the aims of English teaching, and hence the Council must find the answer. (7)

James Fleming Hosic. "The National Council of Teachers of English," English Journal 10.1 (1921): 1-10.