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Contentious Conversations

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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.

It'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

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.