

## Purdue University Purdue e-Pubs

---

Department of English Faculty Publications

Department of English

---

7-2006

# The State of English Education and a Vision for Its Future: A Call to Arms

Janet Alsup

*Purdue University*, [jalsup@purdue.edu](mailto:jalsup@purdue.edu)

Janet Emig

Gordon Pradl

Robert Tremmel

Robert P. Yagelski

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/englpubs>

---

### Recommended Citation

Alsup, Janet; Emig, Janet; Pradl, Gordon; Tremmel, Robert; Yagelski, Robert P.; Alvine, Lynn; DeBlase, Gina; Moore, Michael; Petrone, Robert; and Sawyer, Mary, "The State of English Education and a Vision for Its Future: A Call to Arms" (2006). *Department of English Faculty Publications*. Paper 1.  
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/englpubs/1>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

---

**Authors**

Janet Alsup, Janet Emig, Gordon Pradl, Robert Tremmel, Robert P. Yagelski, Lynn Alvine, Gina DeBlase, Michael Moore, Robert Petrone, and Mary Sawyer

## The State of English Education and a Vision for Its Future: A Call to Arms

Janet Alsup, Janet Emig, Gordon Pradl, Robert Tremmel, and Robert P. Yagelski with Lynn Alvine, Gina DeBlase, Michael Moore, Robert Petrone, and Mary Sawyer<sup>1</sup>

While grappling with the central question assigned to us at the May 2005 Conference on English Education (CEE) Leadership and Policy Summit—"What Is English Education?"—the twelve members of our working group confronted another: "Does it even matter?" Given the marginalized and arguably irrelevant role that English education as an academic discipline and English educators as professionals have played on the educational and political scene in recent years, it would be easy to answer in the negative. The most important theoretical inquiries, research studies, and pedagogical projects in our field have had little effect on current educational policy initiatives, from the No Child Left Behind legislation to the rapidly multiplying programs that offer "alternative" routes to a teaching credential and the seemingly inexorable push toward continuous, federally imposed, standardized assessments of literacy. The ideas, values, and aesthetics that energize our field—ideas about the social and political nature of literacy; about the wondrous and unsettling power of literacy and the imagination; about the rich and multifaceted texts that embody cultural ways of being; about the sheer confoundedness of language, especially in its written forms; about the transformative role of technologies in defining new literacies—have been mostly ignored by constituencies outside of the limited audiences who read this journal or attend the CEE or other sessions at the NCTE convention. Indeed, decades of illuminating qualitative and quantitative research into literacy learning and teaching, as well as theoretically and

---

<sup>1</sup>We credit the rich contributions made by all strand participants during the numerous online and face-to-face CEE Summit discussions. In addition to the above authors, strand participants included Sheridan Blau, Rebecca Calder, Todd DeStigter, Ken Kantor, and Ben Nelms.



pedagogically sensible standards documents created by teams of English educators, seem to have had a negligible effect on the shape of instruction in our nation's schools. In short, the last fifty years have witnessed our futile attempts to convince overworked administrators, cynical bureaucrats, and even our own skeptical preservice students that we really know valuable things about the teaching and learning of English.

We believe that any effort to define English education must honestly acknowledge this historical reality: our influence as English educators has been, at best, minimal. Admittedly, the field has helped foster some noticeable changes in school-based literacy instruction: popularizing process-oriented writing instruction, broadening the traditional canonical view of literature, and introducing the role of the reader in making meaning during the literary transaction, to name a noteworthy few. Still, we have yet to systematically affect public policy or galvanize public support for the range of concerns that excite our enthusiasms and commitments: re-examining the uses and purposes of assessment, improving teachers' working conditions, expanding and complicating our notions about literacy, promoting alternative literacies and literacy practices, and creating a just society whose citizens are critically literate about their world. This last goal in fact marks our ultimate rationale for the teaching of language arts. Accordingly, we believe that any definition of English education must address both what we know about literacy development and why implementing what we know has been so difficult.

Historically, English education has been defined as an interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry focused on the preparation of English language arts teachers, and, by association, the teaching and learning of all aspects of English studies. Understanding the scope of our field is important for those of us who work in it, but precise and comprehensive definitions will continue to elude us. The very richness of content, context, and process in the discipline of English Education certainly poses a challenge for us to stay abreast of the knowledge proliferating in all quarters, but this in turn often leaves us split among competing identities (Alsup, 2006, p. 76). We can, however, seek a vision for what English education should be, a vision that ultimately derives from where we believe our society should be headed. English education, more than any other academic discipline, because of its focus on language and representation, contributes vitally to the process by which our society defines, understands, maintains, and transforms itself. To cast this in terms of the individual, we turn to Peter Abbs (1976), who writes, "We assume that there is an innate need in each personality to shape, to articulate, to make and symbolize in the quest for existen-

tial understanding and fulfillment” (p. 11). English education, we believe, should fulfill this need and thereby facilitate that quest; it should provide a vehicle for change, understanding, and personal and communal fulfillment.

The possibilities for a genuinely democratic society, with its emphasis on both individual and collective well being, are what drive the kind of evolving social change we are referring to here. Our conception of this change is informed by the Jeffersonian ideal inscribed in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution: the ideal of an educated citizenry who understands and wields power judiciously, largely through an ability to use language, in an effort to sustain and foster democracy. This notion of a literate and responsible citizenry in turn is tempered by the Jacksonian promise that access to power would never be restricted to some privileged few, but would be open to emerging groups as a way of marking America as a work in progress (Schlesinger, 1945). It is against this backdrop that we wish to make three main points in this essay:

First, literacy education lies at the center of achieving our stated goals of fostering critical thought, critical dialogue, and a circumspect and vigilant American citizenry.

Second, without dramatic reform, American education, as currently structured, will not be a vehicle for the kind of social change we believe our society needs.

Third, as English educators we must choose to become even more political and play a more active role in the creation of educational policy, because educational reform is finally part and parcel of working toward a more just and equitable society.

In contrast to the external accountability measures advocated by the current harbingers of “educational failure,” we argue that education reform efforts should focus on the classroom and the preparation of teachers, specifically teachers of English. Such efforts need to bring teachers into the center of the reform process in an attempt to realize the “Jeffersonian ideal” of democratic public education. Literacy education is essential to this democratic ideal, and the kind of reform we envision would help correct the failures of standardized education, preserve the American experiment in democratic self-rule, and ensure the strength and fairness of the capitalist economy on which contemporary global culture increasingly depends. Without a critically literate citizenry, democracy disappears; without de-

mocracy, capitalism as a vehicle for economic well being loses its watchdog; and, without proper checks and balances, capitalism breeds oligarchy.

We believe that the effort to define the field of English education, therefore, must be undertaken in the context of our larger effort to envision a more democratic and just society. As we have suggested, literacy education, which lies at the heart of the field, has particular value and potential in a culture increasingly unable to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lies. Moreover, literacy education cannot be conceptualized, understood, or improved without reference to the broader project of imagining and seeking a better world. Our work together at the CEE Leadership and Policy Summit in May, 2005, resulted in a consensus belief statement that provides our preliminary answer to the question, "What is English education?" (see *What Is English Education?*, 2005). That document outlines a triadic framework for understanding our mission as English educators:

The field of English education encompasses three dimensions: (1) the teaching and learning of English, broadly and inclusively defined; (2) the preparation and continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education; and (3) systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning of English. To accomplish this important work, English educators conduct interdisciplinary inquiry by drawing on English studies, education, the scientific study of human behavior, and related fields. They transform theory and research in these fields into pedagogical-content questions as a basis for enhancing the understanding of the teaching and learning of English in all of its manifestations.

Central to the task of English educators is the preparation and support of teachers who, in turn, prepare learners to be creative, literate individuals; contributors to the cultural, social, and economic health of their communities; and fully participating and critically aware citizens of our democracy in a complex, diverse, and increasingly globalized world. (*What Is English Education?*, 2005, ¶1-2)

This essay provides an opportunity to elaborate on each of these three "dimensions" in the context of our emerging vision for the field of English education at a time of change and risk, for we are convinced that this triad of concerns that serve to delineate our field provides a way to imagine an endeavor designed to help students as they confront the profound challenges of the 21st century.

We believe that the effort to define the field of English education, therefore, must be undertaken in the context of our larger effort to envision a more democratic and just society.

**Dimension #1: The field of English education is concerned with the teaching and learning of English, broadly and inclusively defined.**

As we have suggested, literacy education, which is conventionally associated with English instruction in American schools, is at the center of the field of English education. But what exactly is literacy? And in what ways must we be literate in order to create, contribute, and prosper in 21st century America? These are two of the central questions that the field of English education must address as it re-imagines itself for the coming decades. A third is, what must teachers and teacher educators of the English language arts know and model if they are to encourage the type of literacy necessary for all students to become effective citizen participants in our democracy? We take up these questions in this section.

Literacy constitutes a double helix of writing and reading competence. Reading without writing ends up being a passive activity. This definition, unfortunately, is not the one most public officials promulgate. Indeed too few educators themselves understand and appreciate the complexities involved when literacy is viewed from this double helix perspective. Instead, literacy tends to be defined as the ability to decode rather than to produce the very texts that others might “decode.” Notwithstanding recent attention to writing in the National Commission on Writing’s (2003) report, *The Neglected R*, local and state officials, and even Presidents, fail to feature writing in their pronouncements about literacy or in programs such as *No Child Left Behind*, other than as merely one means for learning how to read. Why such silence? In a culture of transmission and consumption, citizens who read but not write are more malleable and are less likely to ask hard questions. From our earliest days, citizens such as Thomas Paine, Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Susan B. Anthony have transformed our democracy by serving as its conscience through powerful and eloquent writings. To ignore the centrality of writing, then, is to deny full and necessary literacy for citizens in a true democracy.

It is not by accident that the definition of reading in many government-sponsored statements and programs is anemic, if not anorexic. Reading is often equated with such low-level and ancillary skills as pronunciation and word-calling rather than with the full, critical comprehension of complete texts, no matter how complex, no matter how diverse, those texts may be. To become fully literate requires writing and reading in the six intertwined worlds that we now inhabit: the personal, the cultural, the educational and professional, the economic, the civic, and the cyber. Each of these



requires its own set of processes and skills, and attaining them represents a highly demanding educational goal. It is why we conclude, following Robert Pattison's (1982) insightful analysis in *On Literacy*, "that literacy is foremost consciousness of the problems posed by language" (p. vi). From this guiding premise, skill in the technologies of literacy follows, but any literacy worth its democracy cannot gain traction based on form and technique alone.

In the personal world we must be able to articulate our thoughts and feelings in language accessible and illuminating and appropriately emotive. Language in this sphere can range from anecdote to discursive contemplation. In the realm of the personal, we often write poems, stories, and other forms of narrative, including fantasy and myth. We read works of imaginative literature in multiple genres, often to find others who feel and think like ourselves and equally to experience others who enlarge our sense of the diverse ways in which it is possible to be human. Underlying our power and pleasure in the personal world, just as in the other five, stand the twin miracles, metaphor and narrative—the first, combining and contrasting to help us see new possibilities and perspectives; the second chronicling and thematizing to help us discover and locate meaning and continuity in our otherwise transitory existence.

Succeeding in school and later in the workplace puts incredible demands on becoming literate. In school we must learn to write reports, reviews, critiques, research projects, expository essays, memoirs, stories, and poems. In the workplace, many of us are required to write reports, memos, letters, presentations, briefs, analyses, projections, and summaries, just to name a few of the written modes serving to keep our commercial and institutional machinery well oiled and running smoothly. As citizens in a market-driven society, we must learn to become sophisticated, even wary, consumers able to evaluate both direct and subliminal advertising, decipher corporate and government documents and accounts, and cast a skeptical eye on a culture madly intent on persuading us to purchase an endless array of disposable commodities, even as we ourselves may be regarded, let alone sold, as products, each with our obligatory 15 minutes of fame. However, a far deeper form of cultural literacy is the vast literary and cultural heritage that marks our own and other cultures. We risk remaining parochial, never to become citizens of the world, unless we experience the multitude of cultures through their literature, music, dance, and art. For those in other countries, such connecting usually involves experiencing others by learning their languages as well. Such a dimension of literacy awareness and competence would greatly enhance the experience and knowledge of American learners (Nieto, 2004). (See Boyd et al., 2006.)

As citizens of our own country we need not only to become informed voters but also to question and demand responses to local, national, and international issues and concerns from all our elected leaders. Further, we must be capable of initiating change ourselves by participating in committees, parties, and movements. This will often involve demanding change through writing petitions and gathering signatures for amendments and resolutions, for additions or revisions to the laws that govern us all. Living in a cyber world

Living in a cyber world has transformed the very nature of literacy itself.

has transformed the very nature of literacy itself. It has created new modes such as e-mails, text messages, chat rooms, Web sites, and blogs. Learners now from very young ages are skilled purveyors of these modes, while remaining, for the most part, non-analytic of their limitations and power (see Swenson et al., 2006.) As Neil Postman (1969) suggested long ago, a crucial part of the English language arts curriculum is conducting systematic analyses of those powers and limitations.

Clearly, achieving full literacies in these six intertwined worlds constitutes a formidable challenge. Sponsoring these literacies in school settings is an even more daunting task, requiring teachers who themselves are prepared professionally as no teachers have been previously. English educators, then, must possess a vast array of talents, skills, and interdisciplinary knowledge if they are to prepare teachers to sponsor such learning, a learning characterized by questions, inquiry and uncertainty (Fecho, 2004). But we believe that both teachers and teacher educators must acquire these talents, skills, and knowledge explicitly in the context of pursuing this larger project of social change that we have been identifying here. It is not enough, in other words, for English educators to understand these six worlds of literacy and to learn to prepare English teachers accordingly; they must also enter these six worlds with a broader vision of a possible future, one in which literate practice helps foster social change and build more equitable and peaceful communities.

**Dimension #2: The field of English education is concerned with the preparation and continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education.**

As a professional field, English education has traditionally encompassed the preparation of English teachers for the nation's schools. This focus presents a paradoxical challenge, for English educators must prepare teachers to function effectively in an educational system that we believe they must also try

to change and improve. In other words, the field's focus on the preparation of English teachers can be understood as an effort to realize a vision for education that does not yet exist. Preparing English teachers is part of the larger effort to imagine and create a more just and democratic society.

In its present state, American education cannot be a vehicle for the kind of social transformation we envision, because the current trajectory of school reform in this country has been in the direction of narrowing the curriculum rather than broadening and deepening it. The immediate source can be traced to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), followed closely by the publication of numerous other business and government-sponsored reports like *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (1986); *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (1986); *A Call for Change in Teacher Education* (1985); and *An Agenda for Educational Research: A View from the Firing Line* (1984). Each report in its own way argued that American education was failing, that our nation was falling behind other nations in the global marketplace, and that the American teacher was largely to blame. The solution to these problems was a narrow program of standardization, testing, and accountability designed to eliminate so-called "unqualified" teachers, reduce the scope of all teachers' decision-making, and penalize schools that did not meet standards according to objective measures set by elected officials, not educators. During the more than twenty years since the emergence of this standards-based "reform" movement, these "reformers" have pretty much had it their way. Thus we would ask, why are business leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and radio talk show hosts at the national, state, and local levels still complaining about the lack of standards and accountability, still bemoaning the fact that education is failing, and still charging that the American teacher is spearheading this failure?

But the problem is even worse than it seems. As many have noted (e.g., McNeil, 2000; Rousmaniere, 1997; Sirotnik, 2004; Cuban, 2004), the history of business and government-initiated school reform based on standards and accountability dates back to the early twentieth century. For nearly one hundred years, since the advent of the social efficiency movement in American education (Callahan, 1962; Kliebard, 1995), many Americans have maintained a deep belief in the efficacy of such linear approaches, even as they believed teachers unqualified to make policy decisions. Yet hardly anyone, it seems, has either the insight or the courage to ask the emperor-has-no-clothes question: since 1983, and actually long before that, schools and students have experienced one barrage of top-down standards reform after another, yet according to most accounts the nation is still far from achiev-

ing educational excellence; at what point do the reformers themselves become accountable?

The fact is that years of argument between proponents and opponents have succeeded only in helping produce an educational system no one is happy with. Unfortunately, the Standardistas, to use the term coined by Susan Ohanian (Masternak, 2005), are so consumed with their central strategy of consolidating economic and political power that they do not seem ready anytime soon to abandon a demonstrably misguided and inadequate educational policy (Emery & Ohanian, 2004). Likewise, those who are opposed to federally imposed standards reform seem incapable of abandoning their central strategies of attacking capitalism and engaging in cultural warfare. No one seems capable of seeing the problem for what it is: an argument between bitter opponents who have pursued their contentious agendas and have accomplished little more than digging the trenches deeper, hardening their categories, and engaging in tail-chasing public debates—all the while positioning teachers as unwitting pawns in the struggle (see McCracken, 2004; Hartocollis, 2005).

English education, positioned as it is between theory and practice, between university and school, between bureaucratic hierarchy and community, holds a unique position to help re-direct attention in the debate from argument and disengagement toward a genuine dialogue that might serve as the basis for reforming schools in ways that support our teachers and tap their expertise, promote our political and economic interests in the global marketplace, and foster traditional American values of justice and equal opportunity. In their work as teacher educators, English educators need to use their language and literacy inquiry to reconstitute the education reform dialogue in ways that might build consensus around the educational values reflected in the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ideals mentioned earlier—ideals that most parties to the ongoing education reform debates claim to espouse. To help us find this productive, dialogic space, we might look to the inspiring work of critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's notion of dialogism, as opposed to argument, as Benjamin Endres (2001) describes it,

highlights the role of mutual communication in literacy and reveals the problem with an exclusive focus on critique. Freire introduced dialogue as a form of communication that is fundamental to both education and political liberation because it requires equal participation by all those involved, and therefore poses an implicit challenge to oppressive social relations. Through the concept of dialogue, he also wanted to stress that meaning in language is not objective or timeless, but is created by human beings for human purposes. (p. 409)

Freire's notion of problem-solving dialogue may be useful for all of us who are proponents of critical literacy, but who haven't had much luck in influencing public policy or convincing our more conservative contemporaries of the cultural necessity of transformative literacy. Significantly, Freire's vision of transformative literacy rests on the fundamental belief that we cannot be fully human unless we have the capacity to name and help create the world through language—that we each have a measure of agency to act in and change the world. This is a vision that is neither liberal nor conservative but consistent with the democratic ideals that inform American culture. Accordingly, instead of attacking those who believe that education should be limited to serving the status quo by continuing to privilege consumer-driven markets that ultimately benefit the few at the expense of the many, we might more productively link America's economic well-being in the global marketplace to a genuinely American education based on Jefferson's vision of an educated citizenry. This is the ground on which even those most ideologically divided might find a place to begin a dialogue. Just as citizens of a successful nation must work intelligently to support the national economy, that nation's interest is best served by citizens who are critically aware of the world around them, and who possess a sense of purpose and possibility based on a vision of social justice and equality. American democracy is not only about political representation and American capitalism is not just about profit; also inherent to these powerful concepts are the need for ideological diversity, generative debate, and a sustainable economy that supports all its citizens. Likewise, literacy is not only a vehicle for communicating ideas; it is also the source of inquiry into those same ideas (Fecho, 2004). In this sense, English education becomes a central part of reclaiming the marketplace of ideas and opening it up to untidy, but thoroughly American pluralism.

Teachers, of course, should be at the forefront of this kind of educational reform and should be among the first to lead young people to the kind of Freirean critical awareness we referred to earlier. K-12 literacy teachers have played such a role for centuries, but their successes have often been neglected, misrepresented, or even opposed by political interests who benefit from the discourse of educational failure. As English educators, we must assume roles as leaders among K-12 English language arts teachers, heighten their political awareness, and become increasingly active in broad-

As English educators, we must assume roles as leaders among K-12 English language arts teachers, heighten their political awareness, and become increasingly active in broadening the deliberative processes surrounding the making of educational policy.

ening the deliberative processes surrounding the making of educational policy. In doing so, we must encourage preservice and inservice teachers to understand these roles as a central facet of their professional responsibility. Whether we like it or not, we must become agents of political and social change and encourage our teacher education students to do likewise.

### **Dimension #3: The field of English education is concerned with systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning of English.**

While English education locates itself in terms of a larger sociocultural literacy-learning project, this project is only part of our mission. To support this project we must strive to play a more direct role in the complex and contentious process by which education policy is formed and implemented, policy that could ultimately create the sort of literate environment English educators seek. One way English educators can play such a policy role is by continuing to create knowledge and engage in inquiry that can be disseminated to policy makers as well as educators in convincing ways and through existing generic conventions. For example, English educators might continue to communicate pedagogical theories and research-based practices through professional books, journal articles, or curriculum materials. For policy makers in the current political climate, however, mixed method, experimental, and quasi-experimental research designs must stand behind our research reports if we are to communicate in forms that are supposedly valued and taken seriously by educational task forces and presidential advisory boards. In other words, we must learn to speak in rhetorically effective ways in a context currently dominated by a narrow scientific view of knowledge making, even as we continue to engage in legitimate knowledge-making practices (see DiPardo et al., 2006.)

The ultimate goal, however, of all of this inquiry into language use and language learning is the creation of readers, writers, and thinkers who do not hesitate to communicate across various contexts in ways that encourage deeper understanding and more complex human transactions. Yet in taking such a stand, it will be prudent to remain responsive to the conceptual and sociolinguistic circumstances within which literacy policy is established. In part, as a result of how status in our society has come to be based on one's position within the meritocracy, broad-based linguistic insecurity has become entrenched in the public mind (Baron, 1982). This linguistic insecurity is often manifested in a peculiar sensitivity to "correctness" as revealed in surface linguistic features. Thus, all too often, form trumps substance, as we witness when the public clamor for more spelling and gram-

mar instruction drowns out our calls for analysis, appreciation, and, above all, meaning. Unless we come to terms with this reign of error as the focus of literacy and devise effective strategies for reframing the debates, we will often be left behind, fighting the wrong battle in the wrong war.

Furthermore, we must continue to distinguish between instrumental skills and imaginative thinking as complementary aspects of language and literacy development, for in the spirit of Michael Oakeshott (1959), English teachers are charged with assuring that the voice of poetry—as a reflection of the possibilities of language and imagination—remains vital within the conversation of humankind. A primary dimension that sets our agenda in English education remains fidelity to the details of how and when words are used. What is the relationship that exists between words and the world—worlds continually giving birth to new words; words we marshal to “explain” particular worlds? How do words—and the sentences and texts that they drive—serve either to reveal and enlighten or to distort and hide? At risk here, as always, is the truth. Yet even that word needs qualification. Truth signifies one of those states we hope we are questing after, even as we view skeptically those claiming to have already found it and are now busy dictating it to others. In short, these fundamental questions about the relationships among language, reality, and truth, which have occupied philosophers and linguists for centuries, continue to energize research and inquiry in the field of English education.

In pre-postmodern times, the slogan “separating fact from opinion” served in part to signal that we were indeed carrying out our moral responsibility as English teachers. Gradually, however, categories and distinctions blurred. As ideas evolved and movements such as situational ethics gained popularity, it became clear that even to see a fact, one needed an opinion, or at least a perspective or lens. For example, without a theory of equity and social justice, the learning hurdles faced by students being discriminated against conveniently remain invisible. Facts or the truth, in other words, were never just pebbles strewn along the pathway of life waiting for an individual to stumble over them; instead, they generally only existed as the result of some gradual social construction (Poovey, 1998). Still, this apparent relativity hardly warrants any English teacher deserting the struggle to continue clarifying the difference between worlds of fact and worlds of fiction, especially when the fiction is deliberately fabricated to undo our autonomy as citizens.

Because the correspondence between words and reality can never be certain, word-reality relationships must be challenged in every instance. In this game of discrepancy detection—read critical thinking—the English

teacher should be second to none. Given the current doublespeak political environment, a confession by Jonathan Raban, a British journalist and travel essayist living in Seattle, sounds a cautionary note here, for, as he says, he has inevitably been forced to give up the “benign illusion that facts will win out, that if you expose a created reality to the corrosive drip of hard news it will eventually rust away” (quoted in Leland, 2006, p.17). A glance at any daily newspaper quickly confirms the extent of this malaise; the same stories reporting deceit, and filled with discrepancy, appear again and again, seemingly immune to critique. Although passivity to misrepresentation is not a new challenge (Aristotle and Orwell are among the canonical figures who sounded these same kinds of warnings), it has taken on a renewed urgency in this new age of powerful and ubiquitous communications technologies.

Aware of deteriorating conditions for honoring public truth telling and candor, and the perpetuation of image and illusion where public relations language masks unseemly policy and bungled action, English teachers have a solemn responsibility to resist ideological domination and to help

English teachers have a solemn responsibility to resist ideological domination and to help their students learn to do the same.

their students learn to do the same. To do otherwise signifies that freedom of expression and genuine engagement with reality through language are diminished. In pressing for a standard of authenticity, English teachers must hold all authorities to account for their utterances. Authority must not be allowed to deny or ignore in-

convenient and unpleasant facts simply to suit its ideology of whatever persuasion. Alarming, such sleights of hand are now legion, which doesn't mean, of course, that previously there was some golden age of political integrity when this was not so. Orwell's (1946) warnings about such insidious uses of language—with which English teachers, generally more than other educators, are intimately familiar—are as incisive today as they were when he first sounded them half a century ago.

Because language remains our chief tool for rendering our values, English teachers must assert that in the end, if all meaning is not to be lost, values ought to bear some recoverable relationship to real lives and situations, just as in a democratic society values should be in the service of broadening access and equity, not narrowing it. The power of the imagination constitutes a fundamental venue within which English teachers work. Thus, we must jealously ferret out and guard distinctions among competing versions of “truth,” and we must help students understand the ethical burden of doing so. Among other things this task involves carefully demarcating the



consequences of any given perspective—what works for democratic living and what works against it. In doing so we will be clear about those texts forged exclusively out of the imagination, with their possible worlds clamoring for our attention, even while honoring how the imagination itself inevitably contributes to particular depictions of events that have indeed occurred. In other words, we will foreground the ethical dimensions of all texts and emphasize the ethical uses of textuality. Conditions are always ripe for fraud, which in turn promotes gullibility and servility. We only need to visit the current controversy surrounding James Frey's (2005) made-up memoir to see that what should be an obvious standard somehow plays no role in the skill "standards" that have consumed the language arts curriculum. The moral compass that must guide English education recognizes that those who control the power of transformative literacy are indeed privileged. At the present political moment and under the present educational conditions, no definition of English education can escape the conclusion that a primary responsibility of every English teacher is to participate in the widening of this circle so as to extend the privilege of genuine literacy to all.

In *Teaching in America* (1999), Gerald Grant and Christine Murray assert that all teachers must answer for themselves three essential questions: "What balance do I strike between expertise and nurturance? . . . What is my responsibility for shaping the ethos of the school? . . . Am I primarily a transmitter or a transformer of my society's values?" (p. 57). In our experience as English educators, we understand how both preservice and inservice teachers struggle with these questions, but especially with the third one. Some preservice teachers, comfortable in the institutional and ideological environment in which they have had success, resist the idea that they are change agents. They argue that the teacher's role is to help prepare students for success in the current system. Just how success might be defined is seldom examined, though usually it is viewed in decidedly conventional terms, namely establishing one's purchasing power in our capitalist economy. A few preservice teachers idealistically claim the mantle of change agent, of transformer, some even embracing a more radical kind of Freirean ideal that values agency among all citizens. The teacher's job, they proclaim, is to teach in ways that might raise counter-consciousness and help make our society more just, more equitable, more peaceable. Most, however, seek middle ground, a balance between transmission and transformation that often rests on unexamined notions of social progress. Perhaps most worrisome are those who simply want to sidestep altogether this irksome question, with its inevitable tensions and contradictions. All too typical is the teacher education student who offered this rejoinder to his classmates' heart-

felt and sometimes agonized efforts to wrestle with this question of teacher as change agent: "Why can't we just want a good job that pays enough to buy an SUV and a summer vacation?" We wonder whether it is morally defensible for any English teacher to adopt such a stance, given her or his responsibilities for student literacy learning and given an English teacher's potential to help shape students' ways of understanding their world. After all, we know that classrooms can be magical places where the seeds to change the world might be sown; we also know that classrooms remain a powerful vehicle for maintaining the status quo.

We'd like to close with the provocative question that Mary Rose O'Reilley (1993) poses in her book *The Peaceable Classroom*. O'Reilley asks, "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" (p. 9). Writing in 1993, O'Reilley tells us that she first encountered that question in a colloquium for teaching assistants in which she participated in 1967, thus connecting that question directly to the social and political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s and to the antiwar movement of that era. But the question seems just as compelling today, when the rhetoric of the so-called "war on terror" underscores the power of language to shape reality and control the status quo, when the process of globalization exacerbates economic and social inequalities, when promising new technologies are increasingly used for surveillance and control, when global climate changes threaten the very social and economic structures on which contemporary American society has been built. This is the context in which we have attempted to define our profession and hence clarify for others and ourselves the nature of our work. What we have discovered through the collaborative expression of our beliefs statement and the composing of this essay is that we have and hold larger, more complex goals as English educators and English teachers than many of those outside our field are willing to imagine. While we may want to teach our students, K–adult, to read, write, and create texts in a variety of forms and genres, we also want to do no less than help them change their world. If this seems overly idealistic, naïve, or even subversive to the many who see education as the accumulation of facts or the hoarding of cultural capital, so be it. It's simply who we are.

## References

- Abbs, P. (1976). *Root and blossom: The philosophy, practice, and politics of English teaching*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Alsop, J. (2006). *Teacher identity discourses: Negotiating personal and professional spaces*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Baron, D. (1982). *Grammar and good taste: Reforming the American language*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bennett, W. J. (1983). *A nation at risk: Making it work: A report to the President and the American people*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
- Boyd, F., Ariail, M., Williams, R., Jocson, K., Tinker Sachs, G., and McNeal, K. (2006). Real teaching for real diversity: Preparing English language arts teachers for 21st-century classrooms. *English Education*, 38, 329-350.
- Callahan, R.E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency: A study of the social forces that have shaped the administration of the public schools*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. Task force on teaching as a profession. (1986). *A nation prepared: Teachers for the 21st century*. New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.
- Cuban, L. (2004). Looking through the rearview mirror at school accountability. In K.A. Sirotnik (Ed.), *Holding accountability accountable: What ought to matter in public education* (pp. 18-34). New York: Teachers College Press.
- DiPardo, A., Whitney, A., Fleischer, C., Johnson, T.S., Mayher, J., McCracken, N., Miller, J., Stock, P.L., Zancanella, D., & Zuidema, L. (2006). Understanding the relationship between research and teaching. *English Education*, 38, 295-311.
- Emery, K., & Ohanian, S. (2004). *Why is corporate America bashing our public schools?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Endres, B. (2001). A critical read on critical literacy: From critique to dialogue as an ideal for literacy education. *Educational Theory*, 51, 401-413.
- Fecho, B. (2004). *"Is this English?": Race, language, and culture in the classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Frey, J. (2005). *A million little pieces*. New York: Anchor.
- Grant, G. & C. E. Murray. (2002). *Teaching in America: The slow revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hartocollis, A. (2005, July 31). Teaching the teachers: Who needs education schools? *New York Times*, section 4A, 24.
- Holmes Group. (1986). *Tomorrow's teachers*. East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group.
- Kliebard, H.M. (1995). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958*. (2nd Ed.) New York: Routledge.
- Leland, J. (Jan 29, 2006). United States of anxiety (Review of *My holy war: Dispatches from the home front*, by Jonathan Raban), *New York Times Book Review*. Section 7, 17.
- Masternak, P. D. (Jan/Feb 2005). "Interview with Susan Ohanian." *Home Education Magazine*. Retrieved February 8, 2006, from <http://www.homeedmag.com/HEM/221/ohanian.html>.
- McCracken, N. M. (2004). Surviving shock and awe: NCLB vs. colleges of education. *English Education*, 36, 104-118.
- McNeil, L.M (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.

- National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education (1985). *A call for change in teacher education*. Washington, DC: American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education.
- National Commission on Writing. (2003). *The neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution*. Report of the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Universities. Princeton: College Entrance Examination Board.
- National Consortium for Educational Excellence. (1984). *An agenda for educational renewal: A view from the firing line*. Report to the Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University, Peabody College of Education.
- Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, 4th ed. New York: Longman.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Public Law 107-110-January 8, 2002. 115 STAT.1425. 107th Congress.
- Oakeshott, M. (1959). *The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind*. London: Bowes & Bowes.
- O'Reilly, M.R. (1993). *The peaceable classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Orwell, G. (1946). *Politics and the English language*. In G. Orwell, (1950), *Shooting an elephant and other essays*. London: Secker and Warburg. Retrieved March 19, 2006, from [http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e\\_polit](http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit).
- Pattison, R. (1982.) *On literacy: The politics of the word from Homer to the age of rock*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Poovey, M. (1998). *A history of the modern fact: Problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Rousmaniere, K. (1997). *City teachers: Teaching and school reform in historical perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schlesinger, Jr., A. M. (1945). *The age of Jackson*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Sirotnik, K.A. (Ed.). (2004). *Holding accountability accountable: What ought to matter in public education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Swenson, J., Young, C.A., McGrail, E., Rozema, R., & Whitin, P. (2006). *Extending the conversation: New technologies, new literacies, and English education*. *English Education*, 38, 351-369.
- What is English education? (2005). Retrieved March 16, 2006, from <http://www.ncte.org/groups/cee/positions/122898.htm>.