

Teaching English POWERFULLY: Four Challenges

By Ernest Morrell

During my NCTE presidency from 2011 to 2015, I have often advocated for a bold new English instruction, one that holds on to our traditional values and our love for literature and writing, yet empowers all students, honors and leverages multicultural literatures and literacies, and accounts for the emergence of digital literacies in the 21st century. While it is right and important to focus on contemporary literacies, it would be erroneous to assume that digital tools are the real essence of any powerful classroom interaction. No matter what technological innovations arise, the core classroom transactions are between teachers and students, students and students, and students and the texts that they consume and create. We still, therefore, need to explicitly define our principles of powerful English along these lines. What I offer in this short essay are four challenges around which the practice of powerful English teaching in the 21st century can be conceptualized.

Challenge #1:

Develop Powerful Readers of Multicultural Texts

As Frederick Douglass reminds us in his autobiography, learning to read is a matter of survival on many levels for the average person, but literacy by itself is not sufficient for our purposes. Some of the most atrocious acts in the history of humanity have been committed by the most literate nations in the world at the time. Highly skilled and highly literate people can also be

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dangerous and destructive when they apply these skills without any sense of tolerance or concern for the wellbeing of humanity. Additionally, literacy is often used in harmful or constraining ways for those who know how to read the word, but who do not bring a critical perspective to what they read. We see examples of this from media theorists who have discussed the myriad ways that culture industries use mass media to shape the way that people think and act.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of English teachers to help our students to be able to understand the content to which they are exposed but also to help these students make sense of this information as it relates to their own experience and their personal, familial, communal, and social value systems. This will mean different things at different levels in the English teaching

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trajectory, but every teacher is challenged to figure out how this reading of the word and world translates to his or her specific context, subject matter, and age group. That being said, it is our responsibility as English teachers to teach students how to decode the texts that they are confronted with in school and in society. Decoding and comprehension are two reading skills that need to be re-learned at each level of schooling. Even though someone has learned to “read” in early elementary school, once confronted with different genres of texts such as lengthy novels, plays, and multimodal texts such as films, websites, videogames, and advertisements, they will need to learn to make sense of this information all over again. Students need to enrich their vocabulary, they need to understand the implicit and sometimes explicit rules of genre (e.g., what makes a newspaper article different from an editorial), and they need to develop skills that will allow them to summarize and analyze the texts that they come into contact with. Again, this is something that differs from grade to grade, but we can all ask, “What does it mean to read powerfully at this level?” and “What does it mean for my students to get better at reading?”

Finally, it is important that students are exposed to great ideas and great literature. But it is our challenge to be vigilant and reflexive about how we define (or redefine) great literature. Is it okay to teach only the literary texts that we’ve inherited? From reading great literature, students will learn a good deal about the world and about the human condition, but they will also learn about the power and purpose of great literature to help us learn to see and understand ourselves in relation to the world. I recently heard a famous author speak at a convention of English teachers and she was concerned with the numbers of adults who stop reading fiction. One way to prevent this, she thought, was to make every effort to create lifelong readers of fiction in school. If students are exposed to well-written fictional texts that speak to them on a personal level, they are more likely to continue to read literature for pleasure and instruction into their adult years. Of course, this means that we will have to revisit the question of what texts we choose to teach. As the world changes and as the demographics of our classrooms change, are we comfortable teaching only the same texts that we taught a generation ago? If not, how will we redefine what makes a literary or informational text teachable? How will we teach the old and new texts that we deem appropriate? And how will our new thinking reflect the needs, interests, and histories of our students? In short, how will we ensure that the new English canon reflects the wonderful diversity of our nation?

Challenge #2: Develop Powerful Authors of Multimodal Texts

In a world where information is rapidly becoming our most precious commodity, it no longer suffices that students are competent consumers of our traditional academic genres. A few hundred years ago, literacy may have been solely defined by the ability to decode a few sacred texts; today’s literacy demands have changed considerably. Students must now become competent and prolific producers of texts across a variety of genres and for a variety of purposes in their everyday lives as family members, as workers, as citizens, and as social beings. Toward this end, it is vital that our students leave our English classrooms able to construct expository texts and creative texts that encompass genres and forms such as essays, research reports, poems, plays, and short stories, to name a few.

In the classrooms of the near future, students should also learn to design websites and multimodal presentations and to capture, assemble, and edit digital photographs and video footage. In their social lives, students will write memos, letters, they may write formal inquiries and complaints, they may create petitions, they will respond to electronic mail. As professionals they will write across many of these genres, but they will also write resumes and business letters, presumably in digital environments. When we consider the dimensions of advocacy and social and environmental justice, the new century will require students who can create eloquent and informative texts that provide commentary on their world; in our classrooms, they should develop the capability of creating multimodal texts that aim to inform, educate, and entertain wider audiences in the hopes of illuminating possibility and enacting positive change upon their world.

Challenge #3: Connect Classroom Production to Social Action

One of those most important things we can help students to do is share their powerful knowledge with peers and with the larger world. Sharing has always been a source of affirmation for youth, but with today’s communication capabilities, sharing can be a genuine source of information, not only to those in close proximity, but also to receptive audiences around the globe. Our English classrooms can be places where students develop the skills to collect and process information that they care deeply enough about to want to share with others. This positions students as experts, as possessors of knowledge, and as public intellectuals and educators. All of these contexts help to motivate students to further develop key literacy skills that they will need for higher education, for work, and for the world of citizenship.

Our classes can become spaces where students acquire methodological tools of traditional, Internet, and participatory action research. By participatory action research, I refer to research projects where students investigate and report on issues that matter to them in the real world. Research, in this guise, becomes more than a chance to let the teacher know how well a

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student has accessed information on an existing topic; research becomes a tool to provide critical information about the world around them. Students, as participatory action researchers, are able to share critical information with others using a variety of genres of communication including but not limited to poems, essays, plays, creative drama, blogs, Internet websites, PowerPoint presentations, interactive video games, applications, and digital films.

From its inception, English has been a discipline that aims to develop students as powerful citizens who use language and literacy to interpret the world and to advocate for justice and change (Scholes, 1998). By citizenship, I don't mean that the students in our classrooms acquire a certain set of political beliefs as much as they feel able to act upon the beliefs that they hold. Schools are, by definition, political spaces, but I am not advocating the intentional dissemination of political dogmas. We need to be able to talk about values of human tolerance and human rights, civil rights, and equality without having these conversations relegated to the realm of politics. English classrooms need to be places where we connect the development of academic, critical, and digital literacy development to our notions of what makes a good citizen and how these citizens leverage their literate abilities to forge a better world. If we do not discuss equity and justice in classrooms where students live in communities that are disaffected by the current state of affairs, we are making a more explicit political statement than if we choose to talk about inequities and the role that acquiring powerful languages and literacies can play in addressing social injustice. Doing so provides a catalyst for our students to develop their intellectual capacities out of a love for themselves and the world.

**A Final Challenge:
Building the Discipline Around the Student**

A mentor once told me that we do not teach “English” so much as we teach *students* English. This is an important distinction. No matter how much we love our discipline (and we should), it merely serves as a pathway into the lives of our students, an entry into their worlds and an opportunity to utilize our knowledge to touch them and to help them experience life more fully. A challenge, then, is to think of our work as an ongoing conversation between our growing conceptions of English as a discipline and our growing understanding of the lives of our students. In order to

make this happen, we have to figure out what matters to students; we also have to figure out how the content and processes of English figure prominently into their everyday lives.

We are also challenged to figure out what matters to the communities in which we teach. Schools are located within communities geographically, but they often exist at odds with communities ideologically, especially communities that serve diverse populations. Communities sometimes view their schools with suspicion, as they should because these institutions have historically set them at odds with their own kin, telling their children explicitly that they should be ashamed of who they are and how they sound. As English teachers, we are challenged to find ways to honor what communities value while practicing and imparting the best of what our discipline has to offer.

And we have to remember why many of us were called to the profession of English teaching. What matters most is not what we teach so much as how we teach and who we teach. The how of teaching English today is a question that each teacher answers for herself, but it is a question that needs to be continually asked, especially with the constantly changing winds of educational discourse where publics and politicians give purposes and practices that may be at odds with personal philosophies.

But we do have to honor and uphold the demands of the discipline; we need to be explicit about the connections between our classroom practices and the “English” that we are invoking at any given moment. Otherwise, what service have we provided to our students who must navigate the same gatekeepers that we did in order to become professionals in the first place? Without some ongoing conversation about the past, present, and future of the discipline, English risks losing its “English-ness.” It can then become anything that anyone wants it to be, and that would be bad for our students and our profession. To be stagnant on the moving train of existence, though, is to doom ourselves too soon to the dustbin of irrelevance, discarded unnecessarily because we refused to preserve the dialectic between tradition and transformation.

References

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