Letting Go

How to Give Your Students Control over Their Learning in the English Classroom

Meg Donhauser • Cathy Stutzman • Heather Hersey

Foreword by Will Richardson

Every effort has been made to provide current URLs and email addresses, but because of the rapidly changing nature of the Web, some sites and addresses may no longer be accessible.

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Foreword

WILL RICHARDSON

Letting go" is such an appropriate sentiment for this moment in education. The fact is that learning, like Elvis, has left the building. That's not to say that schools have been the only places in which learning has occurred in the past. But today, because of the internet and the tools we use to access it, learning can happen anywhere, at any time, with anyone. And, most important, learners themselves are in charge of the process. They pursue their own questions and interests, build their own curricula, find their own teachers, and assess their own progress. They decide the scope, the sequence, and the pace.

That shift from the institution to the individual is arguably the most profound educational shift ever. That's a big statement, I know. But think about the incredible challenges schools now must face if they are to adequately prepare students to thrive in the new global, networked, always on, complex learning environment we all are now living in. Think about the new skills, the new literacies, and the important dispositions that our children must develop in order to make sense of and take full advantage of it. And think of how different learning outside of school looks from learning inside of school today. If you have kids, or grandkids, or spend time with kids, you know what I'm talking about. Find a nine-year-old who plays *Minecraft* and ask her how she learned it and you'll immediately understand.

The irony is that, as a society, we seem to be attempting to deal with this shift in exactly the wrong way. We want more curriculum, more time in school, more assessments, more control, when, in reality, we should be doing less of all of that. If the purpose of school is to create kids who know a lot of stuff (that they'll quickly forget) and who can get high test scores (that tell little about what is actually learned), then, sure, take that approach. But, in a world where content and teachers and technologies are increasingly abundant, the purpose of school must now be to develop the most powerful, literate, just-in-time learners we can, not just-in-case knowers.

To do that—to create the most opportune conditions in schools for our kids to develop as learners—we must let go. We must create classrooms and school-houses that support and celebrate true learning autonomy for students, ones in

which they have real choice over what they learn, how they learn it, and how they show they've learned it. In the words of Stephen Downes (2011), "We need to move beyond the idea that an education is something that is provided for us, and toward the idea that an education is something that we create for ourselves" (para. 21). Or, in this context, that learners create for themselves. More them, less us. Much less.

This will not be an easy transition to make. Schools as institutions are painfully difficult to change because the people who run them (and the people who send their kids to them) are products of that institution. "School" is familiar to us. It's ingrained in the story that we tell about childhood. And deviating from the story, regardless of how effective, or ineffective, it may be, does not make us comfortable.

So where do we start? How do we begin to change our practice in ways that move more agency over learning to students yet help them achieve those traditional outcomes that, for now at least, are required for getting over those institutional bars?

Happily, if you're reading this, you've chosen to start here, with this great book by three former colleagues and, importantly, teachers of my own kids. As a high school English teacher who worked alongside Cathy, Meg, and Heather, I know from firsthand experience the passion they bring to this work, and the deep desire they have to make sure all of their students become powerful learners for the world as it is, not as it was for most of us.

As you'll soon find out, the *inquiry learning plan* (ILP) that they have created and that they detail in this book is such a great tool for teachers who are seeking to move further down the path to student agency yet might not feel comfortable or clear about a path that may seem even more "risky" in terms of traditional outcomes. Their own inquiry in the introduction sets the table neatly: "How can we encourage students to love reading, writing, and learning while also meeting the demands of testing and preparing students for an unsure world?"

That's an important question that all of us in education should be asking today. Unfortunately, however, it's a question that not enough of us are asking. This book is chock-full of strategies and examples that will guide teachers at any level to answer that question in ways that can make a profound impact on their students, as shown by the numerous student testimonials the authors include. It's a deep dive into how to best create a powerful learning experience for kids that lets them own the process, develops them as independent learners, and ensures they are "successful" in terms of the outcomes and expectations that are outside of their control.

Honestly, I'm only half kidding when I say I wish I'd invented the ILP first.

It would have had a great impact on my students when I was in the classroom, and it would have helped me understand more deeply the kinds of changes that are required in our practice in this fast-changing moment.

Sincerely, I know you'll enjoy *Letting Go*. I know you'll learn a lot about learning and teaching that makes sense for the modern world. And, most important, I know your students will be better prepared to learn their way into their futures because of it.

Introduction

So . . . Why Do You Want to Be an English Teacher?

You were likely asked this question by someone as you were preparing to be a teacher, and, depending on the tone, it may have been from a reflective professor or an incredulous friend. Think back . . . what was your answer? Maybe it had something to do with igniting a love of writing in your students, or encouraging a passion for literature, or helping students become "lifelong learners." A teacher with goals like these would never hear one of her students say, "Please don't ruin *The Catcher in the Rye* for me . . . it's my favorite book." But it happened to one of us, despite having every opposite intention.

Now think about the comments you hear from your colleagues. Are they talking about how students can't stop loving Shakespeare? Or literary analysis essays? Not likely. In fact, we sometimes hear the reverse—accounts of unmotivated or grade-motivated students going through the motions with no hint of the love we so want them to have. These days it is easy to blame testing and standards, but, if we're honest, and this book will show you that we were, it is often us and our inability to let go of things such as content and order that leave our students feeling like the subject we love is just one more hoop for them to jump through.

Imagine today's teacher, who has the responsibility of choosing from centuries of writing across hundreds of cultures. How can she possibly be sure that she is selecting "the best" or what is most needed by her students? Furthermore, many of the skill-based lessons she does reach only a part of the class perfectly. Some students are bored because they already know how to do it, while, for others, the skill is too advanced to be meaningful. She also sometimes feels like she is limiting students' learning to only what she knows well, and, with honest reflection, realizes that this leaves out a lot, some of which might be more in line with her students' passions. Just as she is afraid to take risks with what and how she teaches, her students are afraid to take risks in what and how

they learn—a very dangerous way to think in our constantly changing world. She really desires a better way to connect learning more deeply to her students' interests and to the outside world while still meeting standards and preparing students for their postsecondary lives. She feels frustrated because the way she was taught doesn't seem to fit anymore, but she doesn't know what to do.

So what is the answer? How can we encourage students to love reading, writing, and learning while also meeting the demands of testing and preparing them for an unsure world—and don't forget maintaining our own sanity! There are practitioners who provide methods with which to address some of these challenges:

- Penny Kittle (2012) and Nancie Atwell (1987) showed us how to give students a choice of texts, igniting a love for reading.
- Chris Lehmann (2013) and the faculty at the Science Leadership Academy demonstrated that, through project-based learning, students can solve real-world problems while collaborating and connecting with community.
- Will Richardson (2012) advocated for the use of technology to expand the breadth of expertise to which students are exposed.
- Carol Kuhlthau's (2004) *information search process* (ISP) taught us how to approach research with attention to the emotional responses students may face while learning.
- Kathleen Cushman (2010) used surveys as a way for teachers to honor student interests and create an inspired classroom community.

Combining all of these options seems overwhelming. Choosing one might solve some of the problems we face, but doesn't cover them all.

The best option for us has been to "let go and let inquiry"—focusing our teaching around student-generated questions, and then allowing students to lead, find their own way, and discover their own passions. That's why we created our own approach, inspired by the incredible work of the practitioners above and many others. We used our understanding of those best practices and combined them with our own teaching experience to develop the *inquiry learning plan* (hereafter, ILP), an organizational tool that allows students to experience the inquiry process and guide their learning.

The ILP

Basically, the ILP is a customizable tool that allows for teacher and student collaboration and communication as students take responsibility for aspects of their learning. Though it has gone through many revisions, when Meg first created the ILP, she was inspired by Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) *Understanding by Design*, which focuses on a planning method called "backward design":

> An approach to designing a curriculum or unit that begins with the end in mind and designs toward that end.…[I]t is viewed as backward because many teachers begin their unit design with the means—textbooks, favored lessons, and time-honored activities—rather than deriving those from the end—the targeted results, such as content standards or understandings. (p. 338)

Meg took this philosophy and thought, "Why not allow students to devise their own learning?" As a firm believer in student-centered, student-led classrooms, she decided to let students engineer their own learning plans rather than follow a predetermined path from the teacher—and the ILP was born.

The ILP offers both the freedom and the structure to guide your students to success. Through a series of activities and reflections that culminate in a final learning artifact, the ILP elevates individualization of content, skills, and dispositions as students become the architects of their own learning. Most of the strategies in this book can be used individually; however, we will also explain how they fit into the ILP process. When we teach professional development classes about inquiry, we generally start with a preview of the ILP and a description of each section. This helps to set the tone and give participants a visual prior to digging into the strategies.

As you can see in Figure 1, the ILP is divided into four sections, beginning with students outlining the materials they will be studying and ending with a final project called "So what?" Next, we give a brief overview of the ILP's sections, and each chapter will dive in more deeply.

- *Section One: What I will read.* Though the ILP process can also start with questions or standards depending on your goals, we've placed a list of texts first, charting what students will be studying. This first section could be approached in any way. Most frequently, we use theme, literary movement, or genre. Depending on the unit length and course needs, you can determine the requirements for this section, including how much choice students have in the texts they use.

In this first section, students list the various texts and resources that they will explore throughout the unit. We have divided these texts into core and supplementary materials.

It is important to push students in areas where they need improvement. We stress to them that they cannot simply showcase what they are good at, and the point of the class is to practice skills that they need to improve. We try to stress growth more than anything.

What I Will Learn

Please list your essential and guiding questions that you plan on pursuing this unit.

Please list all standards that you intend on practicing this unit. Remember, choose standards that you have not already mastered since you will have to demonstrate that you are getting better as the unit progresses.

Student Growth: The Learning Process and Reflections

Learning Activities: Throughout the course of the unit, you will complete nine activities. By the end of the ILP, you will be synthesizing what you've learned about your texts and research to help you better understand the essential questions, and all of the standards must be addressed at least once in each round.

Activity 1:

Activity 2:

Activity 3:

EQ Reflection 1: How do your texts and research help you answer your questions? What do you still need to learn?

Standards Reflection 1: What progress have you made toward your standards? What do you still need to learn?

(Students will repeat the process of three activities, an EQ Reflection, and a Standards Reflection multiple times.)

So What?: The Outcomes

Now that you've developed your skills, learned new information, and gained insights, what are you going to do? This final project should be influenced by the work you've completed these past few weeks.

- First, determine what the main lesson of this unit is. What is your take-away in terms of the texts, standards, and essential questions? Then, decide who needs to know about what you've learned. Is there an important skill or lesson you want to share with others? Find an authentic audience and articulate why this person or group of people are the best audience for your lesson. What means will you use to communicate your discoveries?
- Develop a rationale for your project in which you'll discuss how your work has inspired you. Using your texts and standards, explain what you'll do for your project in the space below.
- Finally, create the product that you've outlined in your rationale and share it with your audience!

Here we stress the importance of divergent questions that speak to students' genuine interests. Prior to selecting a question, students need to explore the topic. In our case, that might be reading a short text or two from the genre or literary era we're studying.

Each activity is designed to address a standard. In the learning plan, students write out the directions for the activity they create. Students complete multiple activities per standard to show their growth in that skill over time.

The reflections are a synthesis of the content and skills students learned through the activities. The EQ reflection should focus around the answers a student has developed. Both reflections allow students to determine what their next steps will be; what questions do they now have about the topic? In terms of standards, what do they still need to improve?

This is the final artifact of the students' learning. Here, students draw up a proposal that shows how they will incorporate both the skills they attained and the content they learned during the course of the unit.

FIGURE 1. ILP with section explanations. Adapted from "From Lesson Plan to Learning Plan: An Introduction to the Inquiry Learning Plan," by M. Donhauser, H. Hersey, C. Stutzman, and M. Zane, 2014a, *School Library Monthly* (an imprint of ABC-CLIO), *31*(1), p. 13. CC BY-NC-SA.

- *Section Two: What I will learn.* The next aspect of the ILP serves as a plan for the student's discovery and mastery. Here, students will list essential and guiding questions (referred to hereafter as EQs and GQs, respectively) and will choose their standards for the unit. As stated earlier, the questions can be developed before, after, or in conjunction with choosing texts, but it is imperative that students have a record of their questions not only to share with the teacher and their peers but also to help them focus their inquiry. It's exciting for students to see how texts inform questions and questions invite new texts!

- *Section Three: Student growth.* In this section of the ILP, students direct how they learn new information and practice the standards as they design and complete rounds of activities and reflections that show growth in terms of skills and content knowledge. Through these activities, students also demonstrate that they are actively trying to answer the EQs and GQs of the unit. This section is where the magic happens as students make discoveries about not just what they are learning but also about *how* they are learning it.

- *Section Four: "So what?"* The "So what?" section brings their learning together and out beyond the walls of the classroom. Using the reflections, students determine the most compelling takeaway of the unit or course. It may be an answer to the EQ or a skill that the student feels is necessary for success; it will be as individualized as the rest of the learning plan. We start talking about this final step when we introduce reflections for the first time, since students should begin thinking about the deeper meanings and bigger implications of their EQs. This is a fundamental shift from backward design. Instead of students working toward a predetermined end product, the "So what?" element becomes a natural extension of learning, allowing students to think carefully about the content and skills in order to choose the best way to express what they've learned.

Clearly, the ILP is a living document, one that is constantly being updated as students read and research, practice skills, complete reflections, and collaborate with other learners. It allows you to provide specific, ongoing feedback and for students to develop skills in areas that are most meaningful to them. One tenth-grade student wrote in an anonymous reflection:

I loved getting a choice of books and a choice of activities. I felt like my brain was taken out of its little box and allowed to roam free and explore when we got choices besides the boring, repetitive, recurring essay format.

Because of its customizable nature, the ILP remains adaptable enough for you to use regardless of curricular requirements, enabling you to "let go" of content, skills, and assessment, or a combination of them, in an organized way. Let's be real though . . . letting go is scary and sometimes challenging, for a variety of reasons. Turning over control is especially tricky in districts where student-driven learning, shared responsibility, and a general culture of inquiry are not already fostered or supported. Furthermore, some school or course requirements may not allow teachers the autonomy to restructure their classes. Even for teachers who do have that support and freedom, there is intense pressure to "cover" so much for tests, for college, for life. As we contemplated shifting our practices to put more control in our students' hands, we had to come to terms with the fact that we wouldn't always know where our students' explorations would take them. We had to let go of them knowing the symbols or themes that we used to teach and let go of the comfort that comes with knowing we are directing students toward a predetermined endpoint. We can honestly say that it's been worth it!

Our use of the ILP varies according to the needs of the class. In our most individualized classes, students choose independent reads, develop their own questions, select standards-based skills that they will practice, create activities and assessments, reflect on their learning, and share their greatest takeaways authentically. We knew that, if we wanted to pursue this structure, we would have to develop strategies that enable us and other teachers to choose how much to let go and in what ways. This was a challenging and exciting process, and we've spent years developing and refining this approach with input from other teachers, students, administrators, education consultants, teacher–librarians, and parents. Now we're ready to share what we've learned through this book, with the main purposes of (a) demonstrating that letting go is a rewarding experience and (b) breaking down the strategies and processes that support a gradual release of responsibility to students.

How We Got Here

We began our teaching transformation with two important questions: Why do we assume the texts we traditionally teach are more valuable than others, and how do we decide what is the most important aspect of a subject that a student

should explore? As Meg and Cathy were pondering these questions, they were involved in a one-to-one computing pilot alongside Heather, where they learned about our changing world and how a traditional curriculum no longer prepares students adequately for the future. It was during this pilot that Heather and another librarian, Marci Zane, introduced Meg to the idea of inquiry as found in the teacher-librarian field. As a group, we learned about how the ubiquitous availability of information required a shift in the role of teachers and librarians from delivering content to helping students find, create, and share information while accessing tools to improve their organization and track their progress. The serendipitous culmination of our questions, our focus on inquiry, and the student-led learning focus of the one-to-one pilot brought us to where we are now. However, the road was not always smooth: it was and is still filled with questions.

But Aren't You the Teacher?

As we began to use these methods in our classrooms, one of the biggest questions from students was, "Why can't you just teach us?" To increase their perseverance, we had to learn how to communicate our reasons very clearly to help students understand that, though this type of learning might feel different, we are still actually teaching. Weimer (2014) described this phenomenon in her blog post for *Faculty Focus*:

> This is a style of teaching that promotes learning, but that's not how students see it. Based on experiences in lots of other classrooms, they have come to believe that "good" teachers tell students what they need to know. If a teacher makes the students come up with examples when she has a perfectly good list she could be giving them, that teacher is not doing her job. (para. 2)

Therefore, teachers need to not only monitor the feelings of students but also of themselves. Weimer (2014) made a key discovery that is significant when working with the ILP: "If teachers are going to refuse to do something students expect, especially if students think it's something they believe makes the learning easier, how teachers refuse to help is important" (para. 6). Breaking students from their reliance on a more passive type of learning is difficult and doesn't work without clear communication. It is a process that requires practice and patience on the part of teachers and students.

This is where discussions of inquiry learning from the school library field are essential. We used Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP because of her focus on the affective

domain (see Figure 2). Teaching students about how inquiry learning "feels" is one of the ways to help students prepare for this type of work. We needed to scaffold the process and understand how their feelings throughout the process affected their learning. Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP illustrated not only the thoughts and actions of people as they research but also how they're feeling.

Though the ILP is not exclusively a research tool, students experience many of the same feelings of frustration and doubt while using it. Showing them the process that successful researchers go through, with all of the ups and downs that the process contains, helps students to understand that learning should be messy. It shows them that the feelings Kuhlthau (2004) identified—being "uncomfortable," "frustrated," and even "doubtful"—are simply part of the process and mean that they're doing a good job learning. We also explain to them that the discomfort eases once they have more experience with this type of learning. The more they go through the process, the more they begin to trust it. This can be seen in a number of the anonymous end-of-the-year reflections, such as this one:

> At first, I was really hesitant about the structure of this class and honestly didn't feel like I would learn anything useful since it was not like the structure of a normal English class. However, having concluded this course, I feel as though I surprised myself as to what I was capable of and learned more than I expected to that relates to real life and myself. I came to really like the structure because it allowed me to shine in MY strengths and improve in MY weaknesses which I really felt [was] helpful in my learning process.

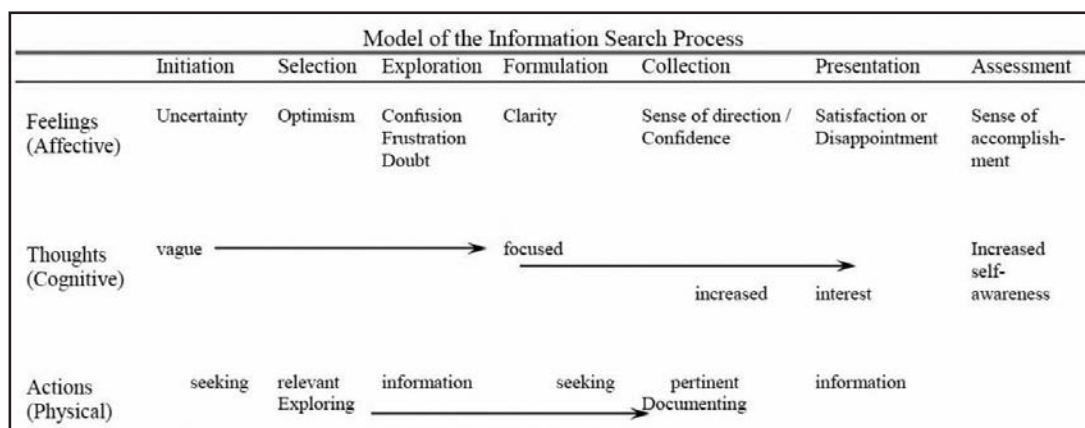| Model of the Information Search Process						
	Initiation	Selection	Exploration	Formulation	Collection	Presentation	Assessment
Feelings (Affective)	Uncertainty	Optimism	Confusion Frustration Doubt	Clarity	Sense of direction / Confidence	Satisfaction or Disappointment	Sense of accomplishment
Thoughts (Cognitive)	vague ——————→			focused	increased	interest	Increased self-awareness
Actions (Physical)	seeking	relevant Exploring	information	seeking	pertinent Documenting	information	

FIGURE 2. Model of the ISP. Reproduced from *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services* (2nd ed., p. 82), by C. C. Kuhlthau, 2004, Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited. Reproduced with permission.

This Sounds Difficult . . . Why Should I Try It?

Though we began in different places, our convictions about this type of learning were the same. So we came together to consider what students should be able to do as a result of their experiences in our classes and devised three outcomes that have remained our guideposts throughout this process. Students should be able to:

1. ask and answer questions using appropriate texts, personal experiences, and one another
2. assess their strengths and weaknesses and execute a plan to improve on those skills
3. build an awareness of their role in their community and what they can offer to others.

These skills transcend disciplines and help prepare students for life, not just college. The ILP creates opportunities for students to build "habits of mind" such as self-direction, adaptability, and a tolerance for ambiguity (see also Costa, 2008), in addition to critical skills like literacy, communication, and collaboration. They experience and begin to get comfortable with the discomfort of learning. As Jen, a twelfth-grade student explained:

> I have never been in a class where I sort of was a teacher to myself. I got to choose what I read, what I studied, what I focused on, what I was able to do as work, and what my guidelines were. I have always been in a class where teachers told me what I had to do and when. So this class sort of made me grow up. I was given deadlines for a product, but I needed to do everything on my own. I feel like this class stressed responsibility in an individual, which I feel will definitely help me next, when I am a college freshman and really on my own. The responsibility for my own work will definitely transfer out of this class and follow me in everyday tasks, whether it is for school, a job, or just in interpersonal affairs. This process of gaining responsibility was the most important part of my journey.

In classrooms where the teacher makes most of the decisions, this response is not likely. As we used the ILP, we learned that we must let go of our past roles, but we also learned about the new roles that students will take up when we let go. They become teachers of themselves, their peers, and us, and they become stronger, more self-reliant learners. This is why we do it. If using the ILP had just remained a theoretical promise, we would not advocate for it. It is the changes

we've seen in students and how they learn that make this type of student-led learning worthwhile.

Another hallmark of the ILP is its focus on the transfer of knowledge and skills by using cycles of activities and reflection. As students move through the ILP, they are consistently creating and revising questions, learning new knowledge and skills, reevaluating where they are, and reflecting on their progress. Its beauty is its ability not only to individualize learning, but also to enable students to discover their learning and for us to see more deeply into their progress and process. In essence, we see the thinking that takes the student from questions to answers to more questions. Along with the student, you will be able to trace learning through various stages, enabling you to get to know your students even better as learners and for your students to know themselves.

As Cushman (2010) explained, there are great rewards for embarking on this type of learning:

> When adults openly explore genuine questions about getting to mastery—and include young people's knowledge and experiences in that exploration—we model the expert's habit of taking intellectual and creative risks. We demonstrate that we too always have things we need to understand better, and things we need to practice. We teach kids to approach any lack of understanding as a puzzle: stretching the limits of their competence, continually testing new possibilities, and seeing how they work out. As they expand their knowledge and skills, young people, like us, will discover even more challenging puzzles they want to tackle—not just outside of school but as part of it. (p. 10)

The setup of the ILP encourages this puzzle approach to learning because it allows for consistent reflection upon and modification of the questions that students begin with. The futurist writer Alvin Toffler was quoted as saying, "The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn" (qtd. in Crockett, Jukes, & Churches, 2011, p. 17). For students to reach this level of literacy, they need learning opportunities that require them to transfer knowledge and skills to new situations in a safe, low-stakes environment and places where they can not only show what they know but also what they can do with what they know.

Richardson (2012) put it another way when he made the following request of teachers:

> Don't teach my child science; instead, teach my child how to learn science—or history, or math, or music. With as many resources as they have available to them

today (not to mention what they'll have tomorrow), kids had better know how. ("Transfer the Power," para. 4)

It is on this "knowing how" that the ILP attempts to focus, particularly when students reach the final assessment in a learning cycle. The "So what?" section pushes students to show what they learned and demonstrate its importance in an authentic way for an authentic audience. This is a lot to promise and a lot to ask of students and teachers. The ILP is a system that attempts to fulfill this promise.

Shifting the Responsibility of Learning

Because we designed the ILP to have as many opportunities for individualization as possible, by the end of each unit, students' plans are unique. As a result, the connections students make and insights they have are more likely to be their own. Even if students are reading a classic text, the ILP allows them to find their own way through it, discovering even well-worn themes through their own fresh lenses rather than trying to "guess what's in the teacher's head." We encourage you to share your own insights as a mentor, someone excited by the discovery that is happening for the student, which keeps the ownership of ideas in the students' hands. In this way, you become a fellow learner, remembering that students will answer questions differently than you would after the life experience you have had. Steven, an eleventh-grade student, explained his experience with the ILP this way: "This class was very hard work but yet I learned a whole lot because I got to study and learn my way. . . . You get to find out how you work and, most importantly, how you learn."

In addition to the skills and knowledge that students gain, they also think more broadly about education. Sadly, some students disregard education because they feel that it's antiquated or just a stepping-stone. The ILP really pushes students to examine how people learn and, in particular, how they learn best. One of the main things we learned is that the roles of students and teachers shouldn't be exclusive, and our hope is that the ILP will help students realize that they can be their own teachers. As a tenth grader, Bria, noted, the ILP is "not just going to one person who has all the answers; it's taking different answers and coming to a consensus to get to a central goal." This is a skill that students will use for the rest of their lives and that teachers can mentor along the way.

Students also become better at articulating and assessing their own skills and content knowledge, which will serve them well in the future. For students

to make their own meaning, they need to experience learning that goes beyond the traditional classroom. The ILP requires the explicit teaching of more than content knowledge and skill acquisition. As Medina (2008) explained, "Babies are the model of how we learn—not by passive reaction to the environment but by active testing through observation, hypothesis, experiment, and conclusion" (p. 280). We're not meant to simply be receivers of knowledge. The ILP taps into this natural way of learning by encouraging students to remain active in the process, creating questions, consistently reflecting on their progress, and adjusting as needed.

Moving Forward

As a result of educational reform, experience, and reflection, we are currently on our tenth version of the ILP, but one thing hasn't changed: by the end of the process, students have discovered their own knowledge and are responsible for the skills they have developed. As you read through *Letting Go: How to Give Students Control over Their Learning in the English Classroom*, you'll find a variety of strategies with which to begin to let go of your prior conceptions of teaching, and, because the ILP is flexible, there are various options for how to begin, structure, and use the learning plan to best fit your students' needs. All parts are adaptable, but, because the ILP utilizes the core aspects of inquiry learning, we encourage you to read each part to see how they interact and intersect. When put together, the ILP has the potential to fulfill Richardson's (2012) hope for teaching and learning:

> Teachers need to be great at asking questions and astute at managing the different paths to learning that each child creates. They must guide students to pursue projects of value and help them connect their interests to the required standards. And they have to be participants and models in the learning process. ("Discover, Don't Deliver, the Curriculum," para. 6)

While this puts the focus on the changing role of the teacher, the ILP also attempts to push Chris Lehmann's proclamation for students: "It is their education, and it will be their world, and they deserve a voice in their own education" (TEDx Talks, 2010). We look forward to sharing our way of giving students the voice and challenge they deserve.

Explanation of Parts

Because the main purposes of this book are (a) to demonstrate that letting go is a rewarding experience and (b) to break down the strategies and processes that support a gradual release of responsibility to students, each part of the book begins with theory and our thinking behind the strategies before delving into a particular aspect of letting go. Throughout the book, we use student samples to demonstrate what these strategies look like. These parts and the chapters within them explain how you can use the strategies independently of one another or as part of the ILP. As a result, the process of letting go is scaffolded for both the student and the teacher. We also address issues and frustrations—or "pitfalls," as we call them—that you and your students may experience in an inquiry-based classroom and provide practical strategies for how to make sure you are all successful. Though we encourage you to move through the book in order, it is possible to utilize the strategies separately. Below is an overview of each of the book's parts, highlighting the goals of that section and some of the main strategies used to meet those goals.

Finally, while this book has ample excerpts of student work, we have also created an online appendix to share a few ILPs in their entirety and other supplemental materials. You can access the appendix at lettinggo-book.com with the password #ncteILP815.

Part I: Letting Go of the Pressure to Know Everything

Empowering Students to Discover

Somewhere along the way, teachers became synonymous with answers. In what many people call the "factory model," learning was more about the imparting of knowledge than the discovery of it. This ingrained attitude is what makes letting go of content—and putting it in the hands of students—so difficult for some teachers and even for some students. The "sage on the stage" model is revered in movies and television, especially in the English classroom. However, by letting students choose their own texts, ask their own questions, and discover their own answers, there is so much that can be gained—by students *and* their teachers. Since one of the tenets of this book is student choice, Part I elaborates on the importance of this theory and provides examples and reflections that show its power in the classroom.

Strategies for Beginning an Inquiry, Choosing Texts, and Developing Questions

While direct instruction still has a place in the classroom, we focus on strategies that empower students while ensuring that students are still learning what they need. This section zooms in on the beginning of the inquiry process by demonstrating how questions can stem from content, skills, or students' personal experiences. You will learn strategies to present this idea to students as well as to scaffold the choosing of texts and the creation of both GQs and EQs. To make meaning from questions, students must also examine texts that present a range of perspectives; however, the text selection process can be overwhelming for teachers and students. This section presents successful strategies such as giving text talks and using information portals created by librarians as well as strategies for working with reluctant readers through interest surveys and other resources.

This part also details pitfalls that students and teachers tend to encounter when attempting these strategies for the first time. You will learn how to recognize common missteps with question creation and the frustration and discomfort that comes when students are responsible for their own learning.

Part II: Letting Go of the "One-Size-Fits-All" Lesson Plan

Enabling Students to Learn How to Learn

Historically, teachers used a list of standards or other established skill sets to mold their units, and, while this approach does ensure that all students are walking away with a similar knowledge base, it also limits individualized, differentiated learning. Some students rush through or miss certain skills as they struggle to keep up with their peers, while others sit through repetitive lessons on skills they've already mastered. Part II explains why it's time to give up the search for the perfect lesson plan and allow students to practice skills that they most need to improve and that are most meaningful for them. It also explores how students can begin to take risks with their learning, practicing skills that might be new to them or pushing the limits of their previous understandings.

Strategies for Using Standards and Creating Activities

This part explains how to constructively introduce students to standards while also detailing strategies for continual work with them throughout the unit. You will learn strategies for examining the standards with students, such as defining verbs that reflect a skill and creating lists of possible products that would show successful mastery. You will then read about using diagnostics to help students

choose standards, implementing student-created rubrics, and helping students synthesize these skills with their questions and texts. The strategies then shift to focus on activity design. During this process, students answer their questions, analyze their texts, and practice the standards. Using student examples, we show how activities progress over the course of the unit and when to have students complete activities as a whole class, with skill-focused groups, or as individuals.

Part II also explores some of the common pitfalls students and teachers might encounter when working with the standards for the first time. You will learn how to avoid the student isolation that can come with individualized work. This part also provides guidance for moments when students have misconceptions about the intention of a standard. Last, you will gain strategies for helping students design creative activities as they progress through the course.

Part III: Letting Go of the Grader

Entrusting Students with Charting Their Own Progress

As the experts in the room, teachers have always been at the center of assessment. This inquiry approach encourages you to shift some responsibility for assessment to students so they can become experts on their own learning. This might be difficult to imagine; however, if students never have the opportunity to articulate their own needs or assess their own progress, their learning is incomplete. To be independent learners, students need to move beyond being told how well they are doing. Instead, they need ample opportunities to set their own goals and create a plan for improvement. We illustrate how this shift in assessment responsibility can also increase each student's capacity for risk-taking and dealing with frustration. By using a mixture of formative, summative, self-, and peer assessment techniques, you can move students beyond "playing it safe" and push them toward independent learning and reflection.

Strategies for Assessment and Reflection

Using their knowledge of the standards and student-created rubrics, students begin to understand expectations and articulate their own abilities, successes, and learning needs. Additionally, they learn to work alongside their peers in order to give and receive feedback throughout the process. Part III walks you through teaching students how to assess their own work. Using skill-based flowcharts, rubrics, reflections, and conferences, students learn how to gauge their own progress. We also share techniques for helping you manage feedback and grading in this new paradigm. Part III further explains how formative

assessment and feedback loops are an important part of the inquiry process, and describes how they lead up to summative assessments that provide the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the skills students have been practicing. The reflective nature of self-assessment is guided by Kuhlthau's (2004) ISP (see Figure 2), which allows students to explain not only what and how they have learned a skill or concept but also the emotions that accompany the learning process. Last, this part of the book explores how a unit's final assessment can be authentic and turned over to the students in any classroom setting. Using the "So what?" final assessment, students share their learning beyond the classroom after creating a product that reflects their growth and understanding.

Furthermore, Part III explains how to help students when missteps occur while assessing their work. You will learn how to deal with student reluctance and how to help students recognize inaccuracies in their assessments. Finally, it details how to help students when they are inclined to focus more on the grade than on the process of learning and growth.
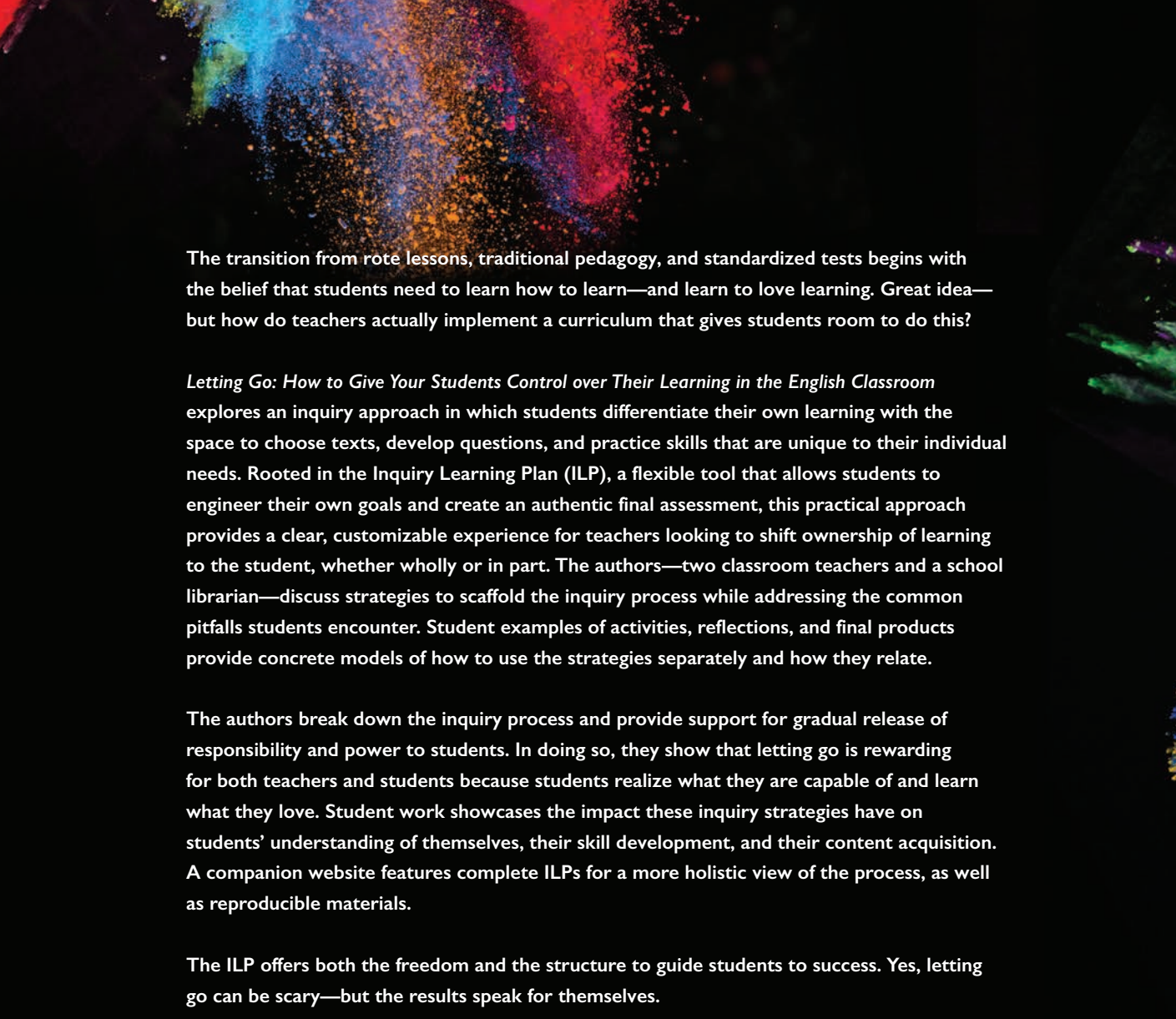
Part IV: Putting It All Together

Using the ILP So Students Can Take Control of Their Learning

Each of this book's parts discusses a different aspect of learning that can be handed over to the students. Once you become comfortable "letting go" of each of these areas, you can choose to let go of unit design as a whole, allowing students to truly craft their own learning. The final part guides you through one student's ILP. You will see the plan as a cohesive way to value students' interests and questions side by side with the standards for which they are responsible. In addition to the strategies provided throughout the book, Part IV explains how to scaffold this type of learning, working throughout a course to build students' comfort and understanding of inquiry.

Strategies for Using the ILP

When it comes to implementing the ILP, there are various ways to adapt it to fit the needs of a course. You will see (a) how the ILP may be used as a single unit for a course, and (b) how it can be used multiple times throughout a course, as you slowly scaffold the process from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Two options for assessment of the ILP as a whole, both formative and summative, are explained, in addition to reinforcing the changing role of the teacher in an inquiry classroom and how the ILP helps the teacher to function in a facilitative role for the student's learning.

Guiding students through the creation of their own learning plan creates some unique challenges. You will learn how to help students manage their time as they work through the ILP as well as navigate the ILP itself, whether as a physical or an electronic document.

The transition from rote lessons, traditional pedagogy, and standardized tests begins with the belief that students need to learn how to learn—and learn to love learning. Great idea—but how do teachers actually implement a curriculum that gives students room to do this?

Letting Go: How to Give Your Students Control over Their Learning in the English Classroom explores an inquiry approach in which students differentiate their own learning with the space to choose texts, develop questions, and practice skills that are unique to their individual needs. Rooted in the Inquiry Learning Plan (ILP), a flexible tool that allows students to engineer their own goals and create an authentic final assessment, this practical approach provides a clear, customizable experience for teachers looking to shift ownership of learning to the student, whether wholly or in part. The authors—two classroom teachers and a school librarian—discuss strategies to scaffold the inquiry process while addressing the common pitfalls students encounter. Student examples of activities, reflections, and final products provide concrete models of how to use the strategies separately and how they relate.

The authors break down the inquiry process and provide support for gradual release of responsibility and power to students. In doing so, they show that letting go is rewarding for both teachers and students because students realize what they are capable of and learn what they love. Student work showcases the impact these inquiry strategies have on students' understanding of themselves, their skill development, and their content acquisition. A companion website features complete ILPs for a more holistic view of the process, as well as reproducible materials.

The ILP offers both the freedom and the structure to guide students to success. Yes, letting go can be scary—but the results speak for themselves.

Meg Donhauser and Cathy Stutzman are English teachers at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. Their former colleague, Heather Hersey, is currently a teacher librarian at Lakeside School in Seattle, Washington.