The 2019 NCTE Presidential Address:
Room for Learning: Challenges and Opportunities in Our Changing Classrooms

Franki Sibberson
Dublin City Schools, Dublin, Ohio

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This is Moriya. I was Moriya’s first-grade teacher when I was a first-year teacher. A couple of years ago, Moriya tagged me in a Facebook post. She had grown up, married, and had her first child. She tagged me with a photo of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff and said, “I dusted this book off to read to Rose yesterday. I can’t get it out without thinking of you!”

Since then we’ve had several Facebook conversations around books and reading, and I love every one of them. As the students I had in elementary school grow up and have children, a few have tagged me to show they’ve shared a favorite book. They still love these books, years after leaving the classroom. I love to see former students sharing books, literacy, and joyful classroom memories with their own children.

Moriya’s daughter Rose is a first grader at our school now, so I see Moriya every so often. Each time I run into her it seems she has a happy school memory to share. I often leave wondering if my current fifth-grade students will have the same kind of joyful memories that Moriya has.

Public education has changed in the 33 years I have spent in the classroom. Living and learning alongside children in a public school has been a gift I am grateful for each day. But many of the changes are causing us, as teachers, to lose our agency and our confidence. We are forced to work harder to keep literacy experiences authentic and to do what’s best for children. Times have changed for teachers, for classrooms, and most of all, for our students.
Today, we live in a time when too many of our school days are filled with mandated testing, value-added reports, and active shooter drills. Recess is limited, and in many states, our third graders are retained if they fail a state reading test. Many of our students are spending hours of their school day each week using digital programs that are guaranteed to “help raise test scores.” The changes have been slow, redefining much of what it means to be a teacher. In his book *Same As It Never Was*, Gregory Michie explains this after making his decision to return to the classroom.

But even though I understood all this going in, experiencing it from the ground-level perspective of a teacher was still jarring. At our first school’s faculty meeting, we spent an entire session doing “deep dives” into test score results from the previous year, comparing our school’s “growth” numbers to those of other schools in our network. As each PowerPoint bar graph blurred into the next, I struggled to stay focused. This isn’t what I came back to do, I thought to myself. I couldn’t remember the word *data* even being mentioned during my previous tenure as a teacher. Now it was the centerpiece of discussion, the tail that wagged the dog. And that tail wagged often. (5)

Teaching is different than it was even a decade ago. We are in a time of fear and a time of deficit-model thinking. It’s a time when journalists and psychologists and neurologists and publishers and community members claim to know more about teaching reading than those of us who actually teach reading. We literally, teach children. How. To. Read. Yet, non-educators who have researched the science of reading for two or maybe three years claim that they have more expertise than we do.

As Kassandra Minor shared in a recent tweet, “The national narrative about reading has been woven by everybody except the very people who spend the most time with kids actually teaching reading.”

I often hear teachers say, “The work is harder now.” The work isn’t harder, it’s just so difficult to fit it into the day. It takes effort to do what we know to be the right thing for our children. To work around the tests and mandates, the deficit-model thinking, and the active shooter drills is exhausting, but important.

Again, it isn’t easy. Some days are so filled with things that have so little to do with children and learning that I have little faith in the system of education at all. But how can any of us stay pessimistic when we get to spend our days alongside children? As teachers, we know the magic of the classroom. And we know the possibilities of literacy.
When I really take the time to think about teaching literacy and how the very definition of literacy has evolved, I realize that there are so many opportunities in front of us. First of all, our students have some of the best books that have ever been available for children.

Thanks to initiatives such as We Need Diverse Books and the many people working for change, more of our students are starting to see themselves represented in books. And as teachers, we have so many sources such as Dr. Debbie Reese’s blog, *American Indians in Children’s Literature*, and initiatives including Disrupt Texts, Build Your Stack™, and Clear the Air that support us in finding new books for our classrooms and for our own learning.

And our young people are doing amazing things. Last year, at this Convention, we heard from six young people who are changing the world and using their voices for good. These speakers, aged 11 to 19, gave us a glimpse into the work they are doing. Each of them had a unique style to use their voices for good. They were a reminder to us that young people today are using literacy in authentic and important ways—raising their voices in order to create change.

Sara Rashad is using poetry and theater to share her story of identity and immigration, while Zeph Todd is using art and words to fight for safer environments for our trans students. Jordyn Zimmerman shared how tools help her share her voice with the world; she is using her voice to challenge the status quo in special education. And Marley Diaz has built on her work of 1000 Black Girl Books and is now helping other children become activists. These students let us know what is possible. Being literate today also means connecting and acting.

Thirty years ago, I learned about writing workshop. Regie Routman was teaching first grade in Ohio at the time, and she shared “the power of writing workshop” at our state OCTELA conference. I went back to school the following Monday and...
gave it a try. From day one, writing workshop was an authentic and empowering routine—a routine in which all children could tell their stories. A routine that built agency and independence. A routine that invited children to use writing for authentic purposes, a space where every child could be seen and heard and a place where students could share their stories with authentic audiences. At that time, the audience for first graders was usually their classmates. As teachers, we searched to find other authentic audiences for our students. We wanted their voices to be heard as we knew the impact their voices should have. But finding spaces beyond the school walls took serious work. Once in a while we’d get lucky and a student would have something published in the local paper or they’d have an opportunity to speak at a board meeting, but all of this depended on adults making it happen.

Then the internet happened. Thirty years ago, teachers could never have imagined the tools our students would be carrying around with them, tools that could give them the power to tell their stories every day and to learn from the stories of others. Tools they could use to raise their own voices in new ways. Social media and technology have given our students what we, as literacy educators, searched for. The internet gave students authentic ways to raise their voices and use literacy to act.

Today our students use tools of technology alongside paper, pencils, and books. They have unlimited opportunities to learn from and with others, to build understanding, and to share their voices with the world. Students use technology in so many ways: to create presentations to show new learning, to learn a new skill, and to connect with others. They read books, they listen to podcasts, they have favorite YouTubers, and they can go to the internet to learn almost anything. They can learn from authors they love on a daily basis, and they can build understanding about a new topic almost instantly. They have so many options, but it is our job to make sure all students have access to these options.

And the very definition of what it means to be literate has changed for all of us. It’s no longer just about reading and writing. And it’s certainly not only about knowing the letters and sounds that make up words. It’s about navigating the physical and digital worlds and understanding how they fit together. It’s about understanding the narratives that surround us daily. It is about whose stories are being told and whose voices are missing. And it’s about recognizing bias and privilege in ourselves and others as we live in an information-rich culture.

Just as the definition of literacy has expanded, so have our roles as literacy teachers. If we are to stay authentic, we must reflect on what it means to be a literacy educator today. We have to be reflective and intentional as teachers.
NCTE recently approved a position statement on the Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age. Each time this statement is revised, the definition of what it means to be literate has grown. And there is no doubt that the definition of literacy will continue to evolve. As literacy educators, we have to ask ourselves what messages our students are getting about literacy. Whose stories are part of our classrooms and whose are missing? Are the things we are asking students to do in our classrooms authentic and relevant or are they based on an outdated understanding of literacy?

I love this quote by Grace Lee Boggs that can be seen on a new shirt by the Disrupt Text team: “To make a revolution, people must not only struggle against existing institutions. In order to change and transform the world, they must change and transform themselves” (Living for Change 153).

As we think about our expanding role, we have to think about how the tools of technology have impacted our own lives. How have these tools changed our own lives as readers, writers, teachers, and learners? How have they changed who we are as citizens in our communities? How have they allowed us to participate more fully in our world? When I think about my role as a literacy educator, I know that I have to start by reflecting on how my own life as a reader and writer has changed. If we want to continue to be authentic and make sure our students have authentic and relevant literacy experiences, we have to grow in our understanding of literacy and use our own lives as readers and writers to inform our work with children.

Just as our students have so many new opportunities, we—teachers—have opportunities we’ve never had before. Opportunities to learn from and with each other. Opportunities to widen our circles and to bring new understandings into our work with children.

Did you know that in 1983 Heinemann published Writing: Teachers and Children at Work by the late Donald Graves, and with it a new genre, the teacher’s professional book, was invented? Until 1983 there was NO real genre of teachers’ professional books. Writing: Teachers and Children at Work was a new kind of book for teachers. It was research-based but not researchy.

Philippa Stratton, primary editor at Heinemann and later founder of Stenhouse, explains, “Until this time relatively few books had been published specifically for a teacher audience. . . . Teachers were not seen as a market for books.”

So, in 1983, at NCTE’s Annual Convention, Don Graves’s Writing: Teachers and Children at Work debuted. Less than 40 years ago. His book was followed by Lucy Calkins’s book, Lessons from a Child. And just a few years after that, Regie Routman, a first-grade teacher in Ohio, and Nancie Atwell, a middle school teacher in Maine, wrote the first professional books for teachers by teachers.

Fast forward 36 years. Not only do we have publishers helping to get the voices of educators into the world—incredible professional books
that invite us to learn from and with each other—we now have social media inviting us to learn from each other every single day. I cannot imagine teaching today without the voices of the many other educators I have connected with through work with NCTE.

We can still learn from and with the people we work with every day. But we are not limited by that circle. As teachers we have sources for reading—our own professional reading and the reading we do for our classrooms—that we can access anytime. We have opportunities to connect with authors and to learn from authors after we have finished their books.

We have blogs and podcasts, we have Twitter and Instagram—these tools not only give us new sources for our to-be-read stacks, they also invite us into conversations.

We have educators sharing their experiences, and we must be vigilant about listening to stories that are different from our own.
When Mary Lee Hahn and I started our blog over ten years ago, we thought blogging would merely give us a new format for sharing our writing with each other.

We had no idea that the real impact on us would be the widening of our professional circle. We didn’t know that it was the first step into realizing all the voices that had been missing from our own growth as readers, writers, teachers and citizens. We didn’t know what we had been missing.

I’ve discovered that growing my network is the most powerful way for me to use the tools of literacy available to us. As Donalyn Miller and Colby Sharp share in their book Game Changer!:

As two white educators, we don’t claim to be experts on diversity, social justice, or culturally responsive teaching. However, we are committed to growing our practices and perspectives by seeking out, reading and sharing diverse writers and their stories, expanding our networks of professional colleagues and influencers to include a variety of voices and roles; listening to educators from many communities with a variety of perspectives and experiences, recognizing and overcoming our own biases, and improving our understanding and empathy. (64)

We have so many new opportunities. And on top of all of these opportunities, we have this. We have NCTE. This incredible and constant gift of a community that has allowed us to learn and lead for over a century. I started my tenure on
the presidential team realizing the gift I have had being part of this professional organization for pretty much my entire career.

When I was a new teacher, Bonnie Chambers invited me into the world of professional learning, taking me to my first state conference and then my first NCTE Annual Convention. Then I attended with my local colleagues and built new networks. I cannot imagine doing such important work with children without the support of others doing the same work.

I think all of us can agree that the people we have connected with through NCTE continuously transform the work that we do each day in our classrooms. In 2019, we need NCTE more than ever. We cannot do this work alone. We are a stronger community when we expand our circles. We, NCTE members, do this work from a place of love and purpose. We have committed our lives to this work, and we are the ones who have the expertise. Together, we fight every day for what is right for all students.

I know that some of our students have more access to these opportunities than others. And I know that some teachers have more access to these opportunities than others. And as a collective, we believe that all children and teachers should have access to all of the opportunities available.

So we have a little bit of work to do. As author Tommy Orange said in yesterday’s general session, “These times are an opportunity to change things that have been institutionalized.” It seems to me that there are two important parts to this work we do if we want all students to use literacy for good. First, we have to expand our own networks with a stance of listening and learning.

These are some of the people I’ve been learning from lately: Top row, left to right: Debbie Reese, Antero Garcia, Aeriale Johnson, Jessica Lifshitz. Middle row: Kim Parker, Ernest Morrell, Ebony Thomas. Bottom row: Donalyn Miller, Chad Everett, Kristin Ziemke, Tracey Flores, and Antonia Adams.
We have to expand our networks to honestly reflect on the day-to-day work we are doing in our classrooms and schools. Whether it is being open to learning so that we can find books that better represent the students we teach, or whether the learning helps us rethink the school traditions we have around Thanksgiving or whether the learning helps us to revise the ways we are using technology to better match what it means to be literate today. We need to listen in a way that allows us to grow and change our thinking. That won’t happen unless we intentionally expand the circles of people we learn from and with.

When we think about our own literacy, we have to be reflective and make sure we are the learners we want our students to be. As Peter Johnston reminds us, “Listening is the foundation of conversation and it requires that we are open to the possibility of changing our thinking. A turn to talk is not simply an opportunity to say what you have to say and allow someone else to do the same” (102). I think this is true for the students in our classrooms and for us as educators in real or virtual spaces. Am I joining the conversation with a learner stance or am I just looking to confirm my own beliefs or waiting for my turn to talk?

And then we have to act—both in our classrooms and schools and beyond. As NCTE historian Joe Pizzo reminded us on Friday, “Silence about things that matter has never been an option for NCTE.” We have to speak up locally against scripted, one-size-fits-all programs and to change long-standing traditions that are
oppressive or exclusive. We need to challenge the excuses of “We’ve always done it this way” or “It will raise test scores.” We have to advocate for change that demands authentic literacy experiences for the students we work with every day. But we also have to use our collective national voice to change the narrative and to fight for access for all children. Whether that means starting a blog to tell the stories of our classrooms, inviting colleagues into the NCTE community, or elevating the voices of others, we have to act beyond our school walls in order to create change for all students to access literacy.

I’d like to end with one of my favorite quotes from Dr. Ernest Morrell’s 2014 NCTE Presidential address, when he reminded us of the history of NCTE as a force for change:

We know how to do this. This is our living. This is the life to which we are called. We are writers, speakers, thinkers, and teachers. Advocating is not complicated. The complicated part is having the courage to do what we know we need to do. The hard part is doing it alone. So be part of a movement.

Thank you.

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@MsKass1. @Nytimes, do better. In my best Yoda voice: A critical examination of data this report is not. Numbers are so LOUD in people’s ears. The national narrative about reading has been woven by everybody except the very people who spend the most time with kids actually teaching reading. *Twitter*, 31 Oct. 2019, 2:49 p.m., https://twitter.com/MsKass1/status/1189992734532218881.


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