



# THE KEY TO STAYING FRESH?



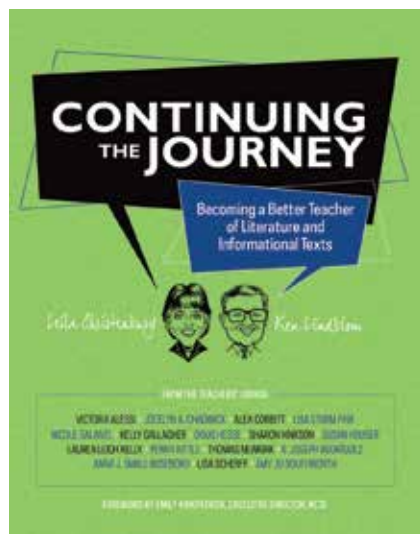
## Be Willing to Explore New Territory

There's no doubt that Leila Christenbury and Ken Lindblom believe in the power of veteran English teachers. After all, they agree, somebody has to step up—and soon—to encourage young people to understand and participate in our nation's civic discourse, among other daunting challenges in our increasingly complex world.

"If not a veteran English teacher, then who? If not now, when?" Christenbury asks.

Helping students critically evaluate President Trump's rhetorical strategies in his tweets, or helping them navigate potentially thorny issues relating to mental health and bullying when teaching a book like Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why*, however, takes skillful and innovative instruction—and instructors.

But with teacher attrition remaining a national issue—English educators are hardly immune—it is even more crucial for accomplished veteran teachers to elevate their



instruction, avoiding the comfort of repeating lessons, units, and texts semester after semester, year after year. This complacency is exactly what Christenbury, an English education professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, says veteran educators must avoid to meet the challenges of teaching English language arts in 2018 and beyond.

### MAKING IT NEW

Christenbury admits she's a little obsessed with the idea of keeping things fresh, especially when it's easy for veteran educators to establish a pedagogical groove.

"You can know your craft, you can know how to run a class, you know the literature, you understand the language concepts, and you know how to use the technology," she says, "but there's a sameness to it that can really dull even the best of teachers."

For some veteran teachers, this repetition may be a comforting survival mechanism amidst perpetual changes both in the classroom and at home.

In their personal lives they may no longer be the fully energized single teacher, able to devote hours upon hours to extracurricular activities or grading essays. They may have figured out how to avoid teacher burnout due to increasingly

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complex demands with shifting standards and data collection. And they almost certainly may have noticed changes in students, from school demographic trends to widespread reliance on supercomputing smartphones.

Veteran teachers should not shy away from these inevitable changes, agree both Christenbury and Lindblom, a professor at Stony Brook University (NY). So they've provided a road map by coauthoring a new NCTE book, *Continuing the Journey: Becoming a Better Teacher of Literature and Informational Texts*.

"The work remains, as does your place in your classroom and your identity as a teacher. What will strengthen you on a daily basis? Feed you as you work with your students?" the authors write in the opening chapter.

"When teachers get excited and it's fresh for them, students catch fire," Christenbury adds.

### DON'T SHY AWAY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

One way for veteran English teachers to catch fire, so to speak, is to embrace overlooked or evolving text genres such as literary nonfiction and social media. "Ken and I are devoted to canonical texts, but they are just a *part* of what we use," Christenbury says, "and we're not saying 'get rid of Shakespeare' or 'get rid of Dante' but we've got to add to that or we are teaching in a world that's long gone."

Because social media has such an impact on all aspects of our lives, Christenbury says, it's irresponsible to ignore it. "Students have very rich literacy lives outside of the classroom, and they are using social media to establish themselves in their groups, explore ideas, and sometimes unthinking adults think it's childlike.

### FRIENDS ALONG THE JOURNEY: KEN, LEILA, AND YOU LOOK AT TEACHING LITERARY AND INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

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It's not—it's very adult, and will serve them well in the world," she says.

"This is the use of language, and it's got to be acknowledged in the classroom." Lindblom puts it directly, adding, "You cannot be an effective English teacher [now] without addressing social media in meaningful ways."

But veteran teachers need not be experts at social media in order to teach it. Nor do they need to dive right in and examine President Trump's torrent of tweets or other potentially controversial subject matter—there are ways to ease into examining and interpreting social media with students.

"To start, do investigations of the genre with your students," Lindblom says. "Look at memes, look at tweets, look at blogs. Look at what they're made of, how they're written."

By engaging in a genre study of social media forms, veteran educators become co-learners with their students and begin to explore social media constructively. In *Continuing the Journey*, the authors spell out a process based on the scientific method as a way for teachers and

Christenbury and Lindblom challenge veteran teachers to be bold, to be efficient with their time, and to become co-learners with their students.

students to explore and gather data about social media forms. After analysis, students can become creators and craft their own work.

"What you have to be an expert at is a willingness to explore new territory," Lindblom says. "When I started teaching, and when Leila started teaching, there was a fixed set of genres. We need to teach students how to use these new genres and not be manipulated by them."

### LITERATURE AS OCCASION

In addition to taking baby steps—or bold leaps—by acknowledging social media as valid texts, the authors have plenty to say about bolstering instruction while still using more traditional texts. Teaching literature and fiction, for example, becomes enlivened when teachers utilize informational texts to supplement fictional ones.



# QUOTES TO INSPIRE ...

## “From the Teacher’s Lounge,” *Continuing the Journey*

### THE IDEAL TEACHER’S LOUNGE:

*Marinate in your content: be an insatiable learner. English teachers read, write, and create. History teachers feel the hum when they near the topic subject or time period they love most. Your content is a subject, but so is teaching itself. Teaching is not an act, but a subject of continual study.*

—Penny Kittle, p. 15

*Which brings me to my insistence that reading informational texts is an ethical act, one in which we must monitor the tendency we all have to fit information into preexisting molds. It requires an openness to the new, the strange, the disconcerting; it requires a willingness to modify our pattern of sympathies and assumptions.*

—Thomas Newkirk, p. 105

*So what is my advanced approach to teaching literary texts? Let’s ditch traditional quizzes, worksheets, and packet work. Let’s stretch readers by having them read long sections of a novel at a time. Let’s encourage them to generate their own thinking. In short, let’s teach them to read books like we read books.*

—Kelly Gallagher, p. 60



Learn more about staying fresh—order *Continuing the Journey*: [bit.ly/2BWSkdj](http://bit.ly/2BWSkdj)

For example, Christenbury and Lindblom describe a thematic unit focused on *13 Reasons Why* that integrates context and “texture” texts, concepts they borrow from teacher and fellow author, Sarah Brown Wessling. Context texts are used to build a reservoir of student background knowledge; in the case of *13 Reasons Why*, a teacher might access Centers for Disease Control and Prevention webpages about suicide or National Public Radio stories about teens confronting bullying.

“Use literature as an occasion to teach informational rhetoric,” says Lindblom.

Texture texts, on the other hand, can help provide juxtaposition to challenge students to engage more deeply with themes; in the case of teaching *13 Reasons Why*, educators can pair poems, videos, or news stories relating to the text—one example is Shane Koyczan’s poem “To This Day.” It’s available as a YouTube video and enhances themes and plot points.

Both Lindblom and Christenbury challenge veteran teachers to be bold, to be efficient with their time, and to become co-learners with their students. And they acknowledge that it seems like a lot to ask.

“[Veteran teachers] need to plan carefully and they need to plan cleverly,” Lindblom says, to take advantage of the opportunity to constructively embed new and changing text genres into instruction.

## A CALL TO ACTION

It’s a critical time for veteran English teachers to step up their games, the authors argue, making sure they help students navigate crucial questions that impact our lives: *What is the First Amendment? How does it affect our daily lives? Where do we get good information? How do we fight back against misinformation?*

“All of these things can quickly become very controversial, since we’re living in an era when the very idea of a fact is under attack,” Lindblom says. “School boards can be shy about this stuff, and administrators can take some heat for it,” adding that, nonetheless, administrators should support teachers’ efforts to engage students in complex, contemporary, and sometimes controversial discussions.

“There’s a lot that needs to be done in English classrooms now, and veteran teachers need to make sure it happens,” Lindblom says. And for those ready to answer the call, *Continuing the Journey* provides some practical advice about how to make it happen.

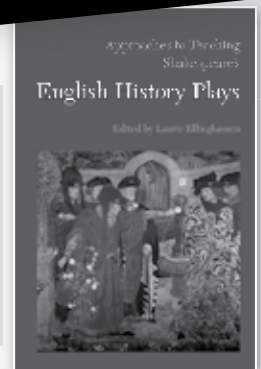
**PAUL BARNWELL IS A VETERAN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER NOW WORKING AS A FREELANCE WRITER. HE HAS WRITTEN FOR *EDUCATION WEEK* AND *THE ATLANTIC* AND IS CURRENTLY TRAVELING THE WORLD WITH HIS WIFE, REBECCA. HE CAN BE REACHED AT [PSBARNWELL@GMAIL.COM](mailto:PSBARNWELL@GMAIL.COM).**

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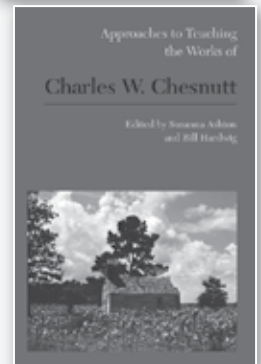
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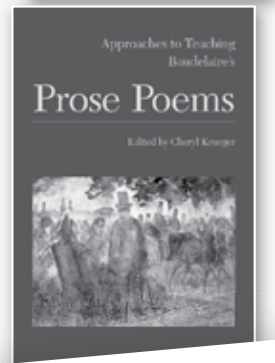
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