BY PAUL BARNWELL

# EVOLVING CLASSROOMS, EVOLVING INSTRUCTION

## Life as an NCTE **Secondary English Teacher**

In *Dead Poets Society,* Robin Williams's portrayal of the prep school English teacher John Keating provided one memorable glimpse into the life of an English teacher. Keating extols the literary canon, attempting to impart wisdom to impressionable young men at the fictional Welton Academy.

In one scene, Keating challenges the boys to see the world differently and to take intellectual risks, having them stand on his desk, one at a time, for a bird's eye view of the classroom—a vastly different perspective of the room. He implores them to heed Thoreau's wisdom: "Boys, you must strive to find your own voice. Because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all."

While there's no doubt that many secondary English teachers take Keating's lesson to heart—the desire to foster independent thinking—the reality for most of us isn't like that of Mr. Keating. Working with homogenous student populations, being the "sage on the stage," and sticking to classic literature still occurs, of course, but they are only pieces of the mosaic that is secondary English teaching today.

With the acknowledgment that teaching roles can vary wildly depending on local context, the career experiences and insights of the following seven accomplished secondary English educators from around the country will help to highlight what has changed and what remains the same. (For additional insights on what secondary English teaching is *really* like in 2018, see the p. 9 sidebar based on the July 2018 survey of secondary-level NCTE members.)

*Albuquerque High School teacher* ***CHELSEA MCFADDEN*** *(shown at left) is one of the secondary educators who reponded to our questions.*

*Here's how she thinks about her current role and how it's changed over her teaching career:*

"These days, I focus on experiences of authentic learning. Authentic learning experiences occur when the classroom closely mimics the real world. I try to include as many experiences as possible.

For instance, instead of having students answer plot questions about a short story, I might have them act out a criminal trial wherein a main character is prosecuted for their actions. I do, of course, continue to teach the basics, but I try to include fun and messy moments in the classroom because I find that those moments stick better than the neat and tidy worksheet-based lessons.

The thing that's changed as I grow as an educator is that I do try and tie these moments into the standards more. It forces me to really consider if I want to do a lesson because it sounds fun, or if it will actually teach the learning objective. When I first started out, I loved having students illustrate every little thing. I selfishly enjoyed their artwork and the classroom environment when they were drawing a picture to go with a creative writing piece, or drawing a moment from a text like *The Odyssey*. Now I ask them to find text evidence that supports their work, and I use a rubric to help measure learning. Otherwise you may find you reward good art instead of good thinking."

## IS LITERATURE STILL KING?

In the past ten to twenty years, many veteran secondary English teachers have undergone a transformation in how they approach content and curriculum. While canonical literature still features prominently in many courses, teachers say they've undergone a sizable shift towards utilizing more varied texts, genres, and writing assignments.

**Heidi Crumrine,** 2018 New Hampshire State Teacher of the Year, is currently teaching a reading course for 9th and 10th graders at Concord High School (NH), where she has taught since 2004: "I think what's interesting is that, in the last ten years, we've really shifted away from thinking of our discipline as being driven by a particular text or a particular type of text, like how everybody would read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Scarlet Letter*." Instead, Crumrine says, she focuses on personalizing instruction for students based on the skills they need, not necessarily on a given text.

**Becky Mitchell**—clearly a multitasker—teaches grades 9 through 12 language arts, chemistry, physics, and drama at Vision Charter School in Caldwell, Idaho. Mitchell, Idaho's 2018 State Teacher of the Year, has also experienced the shift noted by Crumrine.

"One of the biggest changes I would [point to] is that when I was first teaching language arts, I taught almost 99 percent literature. And it was so good to have that shift with nonfiction coming in. Instead of being just creative writers, now we're also technical writers," she says. With her background in science, Mitchell says she appreciates the chance to embed more nonfiction writing into her English curriculum.

But don't fear that evolving trends and new demands will cause English teachers to give up on literature.

**Shekema Silveri,** winner of the 2011 Milken National Educator Award, recalls the power of literature to transport her imagination outside of the walls of the now-abandoned housing project in East Point, Georgia, where she grew up.

"Literature took me to places that I never imagined I would ever see," says Silveri, also the founder and executive director of the IFE Academy of Teaching and Technology, a K–12 independent, private academy for nontraditional and homeschooling students located in Atlanta, Georgia.

"Literature transformed me. It gave me a window into the world of the way other people see and be and feel and think. When we focus solely on literacy in its grandiose context, sometimes we miss the transformative power of literature. It's a 'yes-and'—we need both."

## CELEBRATING COMMUNITY, APPRECIATING DIVERSE TEXTS

Modern secondary English teachers are also recognizing the need to value, elevate, and celebrate the voices and experiences that students bring into the classroom, especially considering the increasingly diverse makeup of public school classrooms.

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2018 National Teacher of the Year **Mandy Manning** is currently on sabbatical from her job teaching English language learners at Joel E. Ferris High School in Spokane, Washington, where she has prioritized storytelling as a way to foster belonging and bridge differences between her students.

She says that for many of her students—who have hailed from Syria, Iraq, Guatemala, and Myanmar, among other countries—there's a pervasive "feeling that we don't belong or that we don't have connections with one another. Part of that is because we're not engaging in story with one another. We're instead engaging in tweets or comments or hearts and angry faces," she says.

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Manning's desire to highlight the value of her students' voices and their stories led to headlines in the nation's capital. During her visit to the White House to receive the National Teacher award in May, she presented President Trump with a packet of letters from her students. "I just had a very, very brief moment, so I made it clear that the students that I teach . . . are dedicated and focused," Manning told the Associated Press after the visit. "They make the United States the beautiful place that it is." (*Newsweek*, 5/3/18: **bit.ly/CC-Mandy**)

It's not just ELL teachers like Manning, of course, who place a premium on belonging and identity in the classroom. **Steven Arenas** teaches ninth-grade English at Carl Hayden Community High School in Phoenix, Arizona—a large urban high school with well over 2,000 students, over 90 percent of whom are Hispanic.

"I'm really big on allowing students to read materials in class that allow them to negotiate their identity. When you look at English and ELA today and what students need to feel included, you've got to give students literature that's inclusive," Arenas says. In order to help meet this need, Arenas and a colleague are currently designing a Mexican American literature course, something that didn't cross his mind early in his career.

Like Arenas, fifth-year educator **Lyschel Shipp** of Central High School in Macon, Georgia, sees the need for a more inclusive canon.

"Over the years, I've noticed the lack of diversity in the literary canon," she says. "So a lot of what I do is trying to make sure that what I include is culturally relevant, not just racially relevant, but also relevant to students' lives and what they can understand," she says.

## IS TEACHING MORE DEMANDING NOW?

The challenges of teaching in a digital age, including information overload, the strain devices put on attention, and the pressures of social media, among other issues, are hurdles that all respondents agree must be addressed. But they aren't all in agreement that teaching is any more demanding than it was when they began their careers.

**Michael Guevara**, a 9th- and 10th-grade English teacher at Southwest High School in the Southwest Independent School

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# FINDING A BALANCE

## NCTE surveyed Secondary Section members in July, asking two questions:

**How do you describe what you do?**
**How has that changed since you first began teaching?**

The respondents included 92 educators, widely dispersed geographically and in terms of content specialties. Early-career teachers with four and five years of experience contributed, as did 40-plus-year veterans and teachers in the mid range of experience.

Responses included echoes of themes that emerged from our featured voices, but other ideas surfaced as well.

Many secondary English teachers today have come to view themselves as facilitators versus purveyors of knowledge, especially with the limitless flow of available information in myriad forms.

**Maria Rivera**, a 13-year veteran teacher at Pathways in Education, a free public charter school in the Ashburn neighborhood in Chicago, sums up this mindset: "I am a curator and a coach. While teaching content is important, guiding students to stay and to be curious, intrinsically motivated people is my most desired outcome. Language is access to EVERYTHING, and today, we can go anywhere and learn anything via technology. [It's all about] how to learn, navigate information and ideas, when to use what tools, and the best ways to share all of this."

While adapting to the digital world spurs excitement and opportunity, some teachers also expressed the need to maintain balance between embracing the digital world and time-tested, technology-free instruction, including time for quiet.

"The brisk pace of learning today keeps students and teachers at attention and alive with possibility, but it also inhibits deep reflection and self-reliance," writes **Betsy Woods** of Milford High School in Milford, Ohio.

"Trying to find a balance between more traditional methods and incorporating technology without using it too much has become a challenge," adds **Craig Meyers** of Bucks County Technical High School in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania.

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Photo from the classroom of Lisa Harmon-Martinez, Albuquerque High School, New Mexico.

District in San Antonio, Texas, perceives teacher demands as having increased compared to when he first began teaching in the fall of 1998. The social media and information age has made challenging and provocative subject matter more visible, and students want to talk. As a result, Guevara says his role is more multifaceted than it used to be. "You have to be a little bit of everything to students. You have to be their educator, their counselor, their ambassador, their advocate, sometimes their social worker," he says.

On the other hand, Heidi Crumrine points out that despite emerging technologies and curriculum trends, the challenge to help students become thoughtful and kind citizens remains the same as it did roughly twenty years ago.

"I think that helping kids become good human beings, that has never changed. That is a constant . . . and has always been my essential question for the year. How can I be my best self and how can I exist in this world in a way that effects positive change?," she says, adding that she hopes that twenty years from now she'll still abide by the same goal.

## UNCONVENTIONAL ROLES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

While many veteran English teachers began their careers in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, Silveri's work as an English educator represents the evolution of what an English educator *can* become. She has seven students enrolled at IFE Academy of Teaching and Technology, her highly personalized, blended-learning academy. The students remain with their parents on Mondays and Wednesdays, and they work face-to-face with Silveri on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Fridays are reserved for field trips and service-learning.

In addition, Silveri teaches English online to students around the world, expanding her impact far beyond the seven students in Atlanta to a virtual class of 9th-grade English students in Brazil, and she recently added two classes of students in Angola. "I'm now teaching in three continents, and I never thought I would ever be doing that. And I wouldn't have been able to do that if I had stayed in a regular classroom," she says.

In 2018, secondary English teachers, no matter their locale, are bound by a common thread—their desire to strive to improve students' critical thinking and communication skills. And beyond that, the ways in which learning unfolds in classrooms are just as diverse and varied as teachers and students themselves.

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# SNAPSHOTS FROM #NCTE18

**"I want to argue that it's important for us to make peace with discomfort. That there's something perverse about expecting always to be comfortable. Life is messy. Sometimes discomfort opens us up to growth and to knowledge and to meaning."**

**—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

**At the 2018 Cultural Celebration, the eclectic energy of Houston was highlighted in an evening of culture, history, and performance, presented collectively by the Black and Latinx Caucuses. Pictured: Performers from the Ballet Folklorico, A.D.C. Studios, Houston**

**Hundreds of attendees had the chance to connect with veteran NCTE members at the First Timers' Welcome where Ernest Morrell, Franki Sibberson, and Donalyn Miller introduced newcomers to our community.**