Policy, Practice, and Dialogue: A Framework for NCTE Action and Relational Strategy

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This essay is an invited response to Noah Asher Golden and Deborah Bieler’s Provocateur Piece in this issue in which they share a loving critique of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This response highlights and extends Golden and Bieler’s observation about “the strengths of our members: policy, practice, and dialogue.” The response essay illustrates how NCTE, an association for literacy educators, could use “policy, practice, and dialogue” as a framework to drive and connect its work.

Thank you for your passion for the National Council of Teachers of English, and for offering this loving critique. My hope is that this kind of dialogue is warmly embraced by all of us who are members, staff, and friends of NCTE. As I wrote on the occasion of our centennial a few years ago, there is “something special about NCTE. We have the capacity to truly welcome and learn from/with dissenting voices—both in the short term and over the long term” (Zuidema, 2011, p. 44). We are united not through silence or superficial agreement but, rather, when we share our (sometimes conflicting) ideas and work through them together. So, thank you.

What I am most encouraged by in this piece is the energizing framework that you provide for driving and connecting NCTE action: policy, practice, and dialogue (p. 85). We might envision this framework as a three-legged stool for NCTE efforts, noting that each leg supports and balances the others. We as English educators naturally love words, but as you remind us, position statements are at best a place to start (p. 85). The heart of our work is in our action: through policies, practices, and dialogic inquiry and reflection. For any existing or proposed NCTE initiative, we can ask ourselves: How does
this lead to better literacy education policies at school, local, state, or federal levels? What is the significant impact that we can have on literacy education practices for curriculum, instruction, and assessment? As we focus on literacy education policies and practices, how will we foster dialogue that is characterized by inquiry, reflection, and constructive critique?

Practically speaking, this framework—policy, practice, and dialogue—can also serve as a guide and inspiration for improving NCTE’s external relationships. Our external relationships are essential to our work, because relationships are what enable us to have a much broader impact on literacy education policies, practices, and dialogue. The challenge is that whenever we work in relationship with another entity, we need to recognize both the overlaps and the divergences of goals and values. Where substantial differences exist, we have to negotiate in ways that protect the core of who we are and what we do, while also pursuing opportunities that allow us to amplify NCTE’s voice, extend our reach, and effect change.

As we consider current and potential external relationships, it can be difficult to discern when to press forward and when to pull back. This is why the framework of policy, practice, and dialogue can be helpful, as I’ll try to illustrate with three examples: NCTE’s relationships with for-profits, with accrediting and standards bodies, and with convention host cities.

The opening argument that leads toward your call for coordinated NCTE action is a critique of NCTE’s relationships with for-profit entities. I share your concerns about the de-professionalization of teaching and about influences that undermine the expertise and decision-making authority of teachers—whether those influences are exerted through policies, media portrayals, cultural trends, or corporate products and services. My scholarship, service, and teaching have in large part been motivated by recognition of these issues and my desire to amplify teachers’ agency, authority, and advocacy (Hicks, Whitney, Fredricksen, & Zuidema, 2017; Whitney, Hicks, Zuidema, Fredricksen, & Yagelski, 2014; Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, 2014; Zuidema, 2012; Zuidema, Hochstetler, Letcher, & Turner, 2014). I agree that our nonprofit NCTE relationships with for-profit corporations must be navigated carefully, for the very reasons identified in your Provocateur Piece.

However, the complications of NCTE relationships with for-profits go well beyond simple issues of money, and we may need to look beyond either-or solutions to seek out both-and opportunities. This requires some context. First, it is notable that revenues from for-profit ads, exhibits, and sponsorship represent a small percentage of NCTE’s diversified portfolio of financial income, and even then, revenues in this category come primarily from publishers promoting titles that are of interest to teachers. Additionally, it is
important for readers to be aware that just as there are NCTE members who wish us to discontinue our relationships with for-profit corporations, there are also NCTE members who value the products and services sold by for-profit corporations. Some of our members create content for these corporations; others use them and find them beneficial for their work. These members may see such for-profits as an avenue to enhance their professional work, rather than a source of de-professionalization. Additionally, many members have indicated that their ability to retain membership and attend conventions is dependent in large part on keeping our prices affordable. So, yes, money matters—not in the abstract for our bottom line, but for our members’ access to NCTE resources, services, and experiences. Revenues from ads, exhibits, and sponsorship help to offset costs for our members.

Do the benefits of for-profit funds outweigh the risks? If we are not currently satisfied with our relationship with a given for-profit, then NCTE could take a both-and approach by leveraging member concerns, strategically negotiating to achieve selected objectives for change. In the case of Pearson, this could mean identifying particular tests or materials and targeting the changes that we believe are essential. Success in these negotiations could directly lead to improved practices in literacy classrooms, while also laying groundwork for NCTE to move ahead with further advocacy for improved policies regarding assessment, curriculum, and instruction.

NCTE faces similar challenges in navigating relationships connected with curricular standards and program accreditation. I need not recite the frustrations caused by the failure of the CCSSO and NGA to invite NCTE to participate from the start in the development of the Common Core State Standards. Yet if we had been invited from the start, would we have readily joined in the work? Or would we have focused on the problematic assumptions and methods underlying the project, choosing to distance ourselves from it entirely? We face similar dilemmas in our NCTE relationship with the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). In a move similar to that outlined above as a possible tactic for negotiating with Pearson, NCTE has begun a more concentrated effort to leverage ELATE1 member concerns so that we can shift our relationship with CAEP. In April of this year, Executive Director Emily Kirkpatrick and I sought a meeting with CAEP leadership to learn more about their goals while also beginning a conversation about NCTE priorities. That meeting was a starting point, not an end in itself, and it led to an invitation to nominate an NCTE member to serve on the CAEP board. More importantly, NCTE’s and ELATE’s elected leaders, members, and staff are now working on two fronts: (1) study of ELATE perspectives on
needs for accreditation of educator preparation programs—and how CAEP does/could/should/should not fit into the picture; and (2) more intentional and continuous work to influence and reshape CAEP’s efforts by regularly providing NCTE’s constructive feedback of CAEP’s materials and processes. Similar tactics could be employed by NCTE, its affiliates and assemblies, and groups such as ELATE when states are negotiating policies for accreditation and licensure (as when proposals arose to require the edTPA in some states). By leveraging our members’ concerns while also underscoring how states benefit from and depend on relationships with teacher education programs, we could have greater influence when new proposals for standards and accreditation are on the horizon.

Yet another example of a challenging opportunity for NCTE is that of our relationship with host cities for our conventions. As we all know, each potential host city faces its own sociopolitical issues as well as accompanying challenges for literacy education. As your piece suggests, our engagement with host cities before, during, and after conventions can be an opportunity for dialogic inquiry and reflection, which can in turn lead to reimagined practice and policy both locally and as convention attendees return home. To make a difference, we must be present and engaged. In Missouri, the local chapter of the NAACP, locally elected leaders, and local NCTE members all asked that we keep our NCTE and CCCC conventions at the planned sites—precisely so that we could have a positive local impact, both on the service-sector economy and on local literacy education practices. Yet we should not think that our own participation is not fraught: Following the 2017 Convention, we also received communications from local educators who were distraught at the way that their schools and communities were sometimes characterized by well-intentioned NCTE members speaking in broad terms but with little local knowledge or information. What we intend and what we achieve are not always the same. As you pointed out, local engagement may work best when nonlocal members take a posture of learning with and from local educators and policymakers. Effective local engagement may mean helping to amplify the good work already happening locally, raising the voices of literacy educators in the community rather than speaking for or about them. Effective local engagement means that we keep our focus: that through our NCTE presence, there is dialogic inquiry and reflection that brings about long-term change in and through literacy education.

These examples are meant as illustrations. As we consider how (or whether) to engage with for-profits, decision makers on standards and accreditation, host convention cities, and others, one underlying issue con-
tinually resurfaces: the relative risks and rewards of relationships. When we sever a relationship in protest, we make a bold one-time statement, but we also give up our future opportunities to journey with others toward new policies and practices. As the saying goes, “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.” Furthermore, we potentially shut down our own internal dialogues by being “done” with an issue. By way of contrast, when we remain in relationship with entities that are not our natural allies, we have to endure some uncomfortable tensions. But if we are strategic in negotiating these relationships on an ongoing basis, we can also work from a position of strength, and we thereby maintain or even increase our opportunity to exert influence and spark change.

As for the three different concrete ideas offered in your piece: these, too, prompt us to imagine how NCTE can continue to grow and affect literacy education policy, practice, and dialogue. Thank you. It is helpful to have practical suggestions, and I look forward to seeing how the ELATE and NCTE Executive Committees and working committees explore creative suggestions such as these that you have offered. Some initiatives and changes that overlap with the goals of your suggestions are already underway as I write this (in June 2018), and I hope that you will find them encouraging:

- A local engagement committee was established in the months leading up to the 2017 Annual Convention in St. Louis, and for the 2018 Annual Convention in Houston, the local engagement committee will have had a full year to plan and invite members into projects and activities. This cycle will continue for the 2019 Annual Convention in Baltimore.

- Participation in the Cultivating New Voices program continues to grow, and the Early Career Educator of Color program received a substantial budget increase from NCTE’s Executive Committee to fund its initiatives and expand its impact in 2018–19. The EC-EOC program will celebrate its 10th year during the 2018 Annual Convention, and a portion of the increase is to support a gathering of past and present participants, leaders, and interested members.

- NCTE’s Executive Committee is exploring how to allocate funds and develop an equitable, nimble process of review for fresh, high-impact ideas from members. We want to develop the focus and capacity for decentralized activism—the kind of activism that advances the goals of NCTE as an association, while emerging in a ground-up
manner and taking advantage of NCTE networks, services, resources, and experiences. We want to equip members to be everyday advocates (Fleischer, n.d.) and everyday leaders in literacy education. In this way, we participate more in the democratic opportunities built into NCTE’s structure and processes.

Lastly, I take to heart your call for increased democratic participation and transparency, and I ask you as authors and readers to partner with me and all of NCTE’s members, elected leaders, and staff in this venture. NCTE is a large association with many opportunities. We are all NCTE—all of us together. As current, new, and proposed initiatives are publicized, please help us to spread the word, make connections, invite or nominate participation beyond the usual suspects, and join the action. In short, be bold in spreading your passion for literacy education!

Notes
1. In summer 2018, the heretofore Conference on English Education began its soft rollout of the organization’s new name: English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE). This issue of *English Education* (whose name will remain the same) is the first under ELATE’s auspices.

References


Leah Zuidema currently serves as vice president for NCTE (2017–18); she is next scheduled for the roles of president-elect and convention chair (2018–19), president (2019–20), and past president (2020–21). Zuidema is passionate about making a difference for teachers and learners, whether through her volunteer efforts for NCTE or in her responsibilities working at Dordt College as associate provost and dean for Curriculum and Instruction.