

# CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

Becoming a Better Teacher  
of Literature and  
Informational Texts

*Leita Christenbury*



*Ken Lindblom*

## FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

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FOREWORD BY EMILY KIRKPATRICK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NCTE

# Continuing the Journey

Continuing the Journey is a five-book series on advanced approaches to teaching English language arts. Written for veteran teachers by Leila Christenbury and Ken Lindblom, the books include “From the Teachers’ Lounge,” an innovative feature that honors the expertise of both colleagues from the field and highly regarded scholars. Topics addressed in the series include literature and informational texts; language and writing; listening, speaking, and presenting; digital literacies; and living the professional life of a veteran teacher.



# Continuing the Journey

*Becoming a Better Teacher of Literature  
and Informational Texts*

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National Council of  
Teachers of English

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To Hollis, my beloved sister, who, as a teacher,  
gave her students both her expertise and her joy.

—*Leila*

To my many teaching colleagues at Columbia High School,  
Syracuse University, Madison-Oneida BOCES, Illinois State University,  
Stony Brook University, and the thousands of others I've worked with  
in school district partnerships or at professional conferences.

We're all in this together!

—*Ken*



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# Foreword

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**EMILY KIRKPATRICK**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Renewal. Such is the season within NCTE at the time of conceiving this book series and its first publication. As we Turn the Page on many things within the professional organization for English teachers, a foundational turn is to reclaim the English classroom as the very center of our universe. We renew our energy toward supporting and leading the mainstay of every classroom, too—and that is the English teacher.

In a conversation between the three of us, Leila and Ken’s idea for this book series intersected with NCTE’s exploration of new ways to spur renewal within the profession. Producing this flagship first book—and envisioning all that is yet to come—is indeed a continuous journey. We welcome the esteemed authors home to NCTE, and also embrace their wisdom, experiences, and strategies for continuous improvement.

I see NCTE as the nexus of practice and progress in English and literacy education. True to that form, the authors have wisely involved nearly two dozen accomplished teachers—and NCTE members—to add to the formative insight included in the following pages. As you turn the pages of this book and the forthcoming series installments, we encourage you to turn and return to the Teachers’ Lounge for ongoing ideas, problem solving, and comfort.

Continued journeys are naturally filled with opportunities for continuous improvement. This series is designed to support that, with the scaffolding of trusted leaders Leila and Ken and their treasure trove of friends and colleagues found in the innovative Teachers’

Lounge. Each reader and future reader is invited to Turn the Page with NCTE as we continue to unfold the mysteries and practices destined to guide the next generation of readers and writers in our world.

## CHAPTER 1

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# Changes in You, Changes in Your Classroom, Changes in Your School

And do not think of the fruit of action . . .

Not fare well,

But fare forward, voyagers.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*,  
*Four Quartets* (III, 38, 46–47)

**W**hat is a veteran teacher?

New teachers are nervous about new teacher things: Will the students listen to me? Can I develop an authoritative classroom presence? What do I say if a parent calls? Will I always be just one day ahead of the students on the reading? Will I do well on my formal observations? What happens if I make a mistake in front of the students or if I don't know an answer to their questions? Will I react appropriately if an emergency occurs in my class?

Veteran teachers are past most of those concerns, except for occasional hiccups. But that doesn't mean they are done becoming better teachers.

It means they are ready to focus entirely on the real challenge of teaching: doing everything necessary to ensure that all students learn as quickly and as much as possible. This deceptively simple task is fraught with complexity. Students' ability levels, backgrounds, prior

learning and experience in and out of school, home lives, attitudes, and personal preferences all make a difference in the ability to learn. School cultures, leadership, the standards of the state and/or school system, and the local politics of schooling and evaluation of teachers also make a difference. The world outside school, including leaps in technology and disciplinary content, changes in national and global culture, and state and national education policies, makes a difference. Add to all this the fact that about 13 percent of the teaching force (or 457,000 teachers) changes schools or leaves the profession every year (Haynes). Veteran teachers know teaching is not a profession for the faint of heart!

Who is this book for?

There are lots of good books for beginning teachers, and we humbly suggest that our recently published *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts* (Christenbury and Lindblom, 4th ed.) might be counted among them. But it takes three to seven years for a teacher to become highly skilled (Haynes 5), and even those teaching for more years than that continue to face new challenges and are eager to learn about new pedagogical methods, technologies, and content that will enrich their classrooms. Veteran teachers can use guidance, too. Some districts—but not nearly enough—have excellent mentoring and induction programs that work with teachers beyond their first years in the classroom. But what about the teachers who don't have access to those programs? Those are the teachers to whom we offer this book, the first in a series of books planned with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This Continuing the Journey series is written primarily for teachers in approximately years 3–10 and those who support them (mentors, senior colleagues, department chairs, and school leaders). These are veteran teachers who can manage a classroom, speak authoritatively with parents, and approach new content with confidence. If this is you, then in many ways you are in the perfect position to take your ELA teaching to the highest levels. And we are honored to assist you in making that climb.

How does one start taking the next step, continuing the journey to becoming a more skilled veteran teacher? We suggest that, like the world's greatest explorers, you begin by surveying the territory: where you've come from and where you're going.

## WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED TEACHING

Who were you when you first started teaching? If your life were a film, could you rewind it to see yourself back then, to recapture for a moment the person you were? At the time, what did you believe and what did you trust? What did you think the future would hold?

When you first started teaching, you were likely a person with a strong set of beliefs, goals, and ideals, much of which came from two sources.

First, you had behind you years of being a successful student and observing and participating in numerous classes and with numerous teachers. Second, at the point when you decided to be a teacher, you completed some form of a teacher preparation program that gave you information about school curricula, learning, and how to connect with your students. These two sources were probably much of the foundation for the beginning of your teaching career. And, at the time you entered your first classroom, you may well have thought that most of your struggles were largely in the past; after all, you were starting your career and had cleared academic and credentialing hurdles, you had a contract with a school system, and, if you were lucky, you had, at the beginning of the year, your own classroom, supportive colleagues, and helpful materials to guide you in your teaching. All clear and all set, right?

Not so much.

Like many of us who are still teaching, what you most likely realized early on is that you were not *clear* and not *set* at all. The beliefs, goals, and ideals with which you started began to shift and evolve, and the recollection of your time as a student has become far less reliable as an indication of what you should do as a teacher. The students you now work with are increasingly different from you in terms of their tastes, habits, pop culture interests, and experience. Finally, that teacher preparation work you so eagerly undertook—and in which you most likely excelled—may seem murkier and hazier as the teaching days stretch on and as you swap stories and advice with teaching colleagues. Sure, you can depend on the experience you've earned in your years of teaching, and your teacher persona is probably quite well honed. But accomplished veteran teachers know that the job of learning is never finished, and they know that trying to teach English well is a challenging, even humbling, struggle.



## WHAT HAPPENED?

What happened to you and that assured, confident person you were when you entered your first classroom?

What happened—and is still happening—is the journey of being and becoming a teacher, a *continuing* journey that is compelling, even exhilarating, but also uncertain, fraught with difficulties, never finished. In this book, we talk with you about how you have changed, how your classroom and school have changed, and what you can do to take your teaching to the next level. Our focus in this first book of the Continuing the Journey series is texts—literary, informational, and literary nonfiction—and we hope to provide you with not only support but also solid activities and wide-ranging resources to help you continue your journey to becoming a better teacher. After all, since the first year you began teaching, those texts and the best options for approaching them have also evolved. As we change, so changes virtually everything about the world around us.

George Couros, whose *The Innovator's Mindset* has captivated many educators, says, “When I first started teaching, I remember thinking that students should learn the way I taught; they should adjust to me. I could not have been more wrong. A great teacher adjusts to the learner” (38).

And the need to adapt to students and the larger social and political contexts of teaching and learning is not simply some sort of artificial and external professional goal; adapting is essential if you wish to stay in the classroom as a functioning, healthy, and effective teacher. Growing in your teaching is a way forward, a way to stay fresh and engaged; staying the same is stagnation and also an invitation to become less positive, less enthusiastic, and less effective. This is not what you saw yourself becoming when you first entered the classroom. It is not what you want for yourself or what we want for ourselves, and it's not what we want for you.

That you are reading this book is a clear sign that you too are interested in staying fresh and engaged as a teacher. You may know, as we do, other teachers who are less energetic in their professional growth. Writing a book such as this is a bit of a balancing act, as we seek to honor the great work veteran teachers do while acknowledging that some veteran

teachers seem somewhat defeated. All teachers—including us, of course—can always find room for improvement. While we raise issues and concerns that may not reflect you as a teacher, see if you can recognize the teacher you might have become if you had not kept your passion and nurtured your spark. And we would love it if any aspect of this book helps you to rekindle the kind of enthusiasm for professional growth that inspires colleagues who have lost their fire or have allowed it to dim.

## **CHANGES IN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE**

So what are the changes you are confronting? First, you have changed as a person. Just by moving through the years, by getting older, you have a more complicated life than you did when you first started teaching. Whether you entered the classroom right after college, came later to teaching as a career change, reentered teaching after some time either at home or in a different career, today you likely have more obligations, more responsibilities, more possessions, and more societal and familial expectations than you did years before. All of these can be immensely satisfying, a big part of your identity as a human being, but they all also complicate your life. The time you need to prepare for class, grade papers, and participate in other school-based activities is competing with the time you need for significant others, children, parents, extended family, and community. The mental energy you need as a teacher is divided between your professional obligations and the many hats you wear as a functioning adult. People write frequently about work-life balance—and this concern affects both men and women—but there are few convincing stories of how anyone, all the time, can balance the demands of a profession, a family, a home, a community, and a life. This is especially true of teachers.

As a teacher with a sincere commitment to your students and to your profession, this tug-of-war on your time is most likely a constant source of friction and, for some, discouragement. It's probably not what you imagined your teaching life would be, and if you have not been able to resolve some of these tensions between a complex personal life and a demanding professional life, it means that you are a teacher who is under almost constant stress. It can feel as though you are under siege. And you are not alone.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* reports, “Forty-six percent of U.S. teachers say they experience a lot of daily stress—that’s more than what the nation’s doctors report, and the topmost among other professional categories, level with nurses” (Walker). The article also explores aspects of what puts teachers under stress, and there are—no surprise—numerous culprits. The article maintains, “For many American educators, the current teaching arrangement appears somewhat grim: Schools expect a lot out of their teachers, without providing them with sufficient training and time during the school day to carry out their many roles and responsibilities” (Walker). Similarly, a Learning Policy Institute report (Sutcher et al.) notes that “contrary to common belief, retirements generally constitute less than one-third of those who leave teaching in a given year. Of those who leave teaching voluntarily, most teachers list some type of dissatisfaction as very important or extremely important in their decision to leave the profession.” And once they leave, few come back: the report observes that “only a third of teachers who exit the profession ever return” (Sutcher et al.).

## CHANGES IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Despite the daily stimulation of teaching and despite the wonderful students who come into your classroom every day with high expectations to be challenged—and sometimes also entertained—it is quite possible that you, at some point in a school year, are just overwhelmed. You may find yourself dealing with symptoms of anxiety and depression. A common shorthand term for this is *burnout*, and it affects many in the classroom (Chartook and Weiner; Draper). And, truth be told, burnout affects many outside of education, where, in our busyness culture, long hours, deferred vacations, and being constantly available, in touch, and online are almost perverse hallmarks of success and pride. It can be exhausting (see in particular Pang’s *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*, which makes an argument about the power of rest—for all of us). In the last several years, political pressure and constant changes in curriculum and testing have pushed many veteran teachers to new levels of stress.

Ken has experienced this firsthand:



**THERE WAS A PERIOD** *a few years ago when pre-service teachers in New York State were suddenly required to take all new certification exams, including a time-consuming and overly technical portfolio called edTPA. High scores were set for these assessments and very little time was given to preparing teacher education programs to get their students ready for the changes. At the same time, new legislation was being prepared to allow commercial operations to begin producing teachers. It was difficult not to see these changes as motivated entirely by corporate greed and arranged to make traditional teacher education programs fail, opening the market to profiteers. The first semester these changes took place, I watched a group of highly intelligent, motivated, gifted graduate students crack under the pressure, one by one breaking down into crying fits as they tried to jump through a set of flaming hoops that did nothing but distract them from learning about real learning and real teaching.*

*I had to stay resolute and confident for these preservice teachers and my colleagues at Stony Brook University, but in private I was a mess. I became consumed with the absolute certainty that our students would fail, that our program would be shut down, and that twenty-five years of service to English education would come crashing down around me. I had trouble sleeping, I couldn't focus effectively on work, and work-life balance was a joke. Getting through the days was a serious challenge, and the job I adored had become a source of almost crippling anxiety. With the love of an understanding spouse and the calm guidance of a professional therapist, I was able to get slowly back on track and then to start fighting back, getting involved in the teachers union and other advocacy efforts. The images of my adult students convulsing with sobs from exhaustion and fear—which still upsets me enormously—also fueled*

*these efforts, helping me find the strength to speak truth to power when I had opportunities to confront those who made the dubious decisions that threatened all I hold dear.*

*I was lucky that my negative experience turned around; but I will never forget the hopelessness and depression I experienced in the depths of this struggle, and my heart goes out to the many educators (particularly K-12 teachers) dealing with it now.*

---

The sense of hopelessness and depression related to burnout is a real phenomenon, not just a soft excuse for those who can't keep up. In education the statistics are stark and remarkably consistent over recent decades. As an initial point, who actually stays in teaching—who makes the first cut and continues on—is a surprisingly small group, because about one-third to one-half of *all* beginning teachers leave the profession in the first five years (Ingersoll). For those who stay, and you are one of them—congratulations!—the challenge continues and, in some cases, intensifies. A 2013 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company survey revealed that only 39 percent of US teachers said they were satisfied in their careers (Rankin 3), and a 2015 American Federation of Teachers survey of almost 30,000 teachers noted that while 89 percent had been very positive about teaching at the beginning of their careers, at the point of the survey only 15 percent were similarly positive (Rankin 3). This may also be true of you.

Many teachers are overwhelmed. They are committed and talented. Yet they are ready to quit. What has changed?

## **CHANGES IN YOUR CLASSROOM AND YOUR SCHOOL**

If you feel that your professional life is less satisfying, beyond the conflict between your personal and teaching lives, another reason may be that your classroom and school district, your school landscape as it were, have changed. Like Ken's challenge regarding the imposition of edTPA, a foundational shift may have occurred in your school context. Your

school and school system are, like most in this country, under tremendous pressure to show student achievement and student learning, and like most school systems, the one ubiquitous way chosen to “conclusively” demonstrate success is through student test scores. Reading and language arts are prime territory for routine, large-scale testing, and you and your students are undeniably affected. Even if you don’t have students in your everyday classes who are required to take end-of-year high-stakes tests, you and your students are part of the testing landscape in your school system, and all of you are affected.

Additionally, if you are like many teachers, your students’ test scores are used as a routine measure of your own effectiveness as a teacher, a requirement for states to earn federal funds during the Race to the Top era. Responsible school administrators at all levels are fully aware that good teaching is only one component of what leads to successful test scores, and that test scores are only one potential sign of effective teaching, yet it is routine to look at student scores in direct relation to those students’ teachers. The factors you cannot control—if for some reason your students’ home lives are now in transition or difficult, if they are undergoing or have undergone recent personal upset or even trauma—are not accounted for in large-scale test scores. Likewise, if you have students for whom English is a new language or students who are living with a disability, their test scores may be assessed and reported without consideration of those factors. And all of the successes you have helped students to achieve that aren’t measured by tests may be ignored, or they may only show up on standardized tests years later. And yet today, teachers and school administrators live and die by these narrow numbers, and politicians and the press often use them as clubs to beat educators with whenever it suits their interests. Education can be a grim game.

Add to this national concentration on test scores the routine changes any school district will make every few years. Grade reporting systems change; requirements regarding lesson plans are altered; report format and frequency are revamped. New technology that your school may wish to implement can mean a serious shift from, for example:

- ▶ Paper notebooks to laptops
- ▶ Chalkboards to interactive whiteboards

- ▶ Overheads to document cameras
- ▶ Pen or pencil to Google Classroom, Blackboard, Moodle, or some other electronic platform
- ▶ Print textbooks to ebooks
- ▶ Oral class discussion to Twitter chats, or to an inclusion of back-channel discussion
- ▶ Uses of the latest electronic platforms and apps for everything from record-keeping to communicating with students and parents outside the school day

Student and teacher participation in social media, once prohibited, may now be encouraged as an asset to school learning. Smartphones, once shunned, are now viewed in some schools as valuable educational enhancements, and teachers are urged to incorporate them in lessons, in addition to other student-owned technology. The textbook series you may have been comfortable with is now replaced with electronic links to pieces of literature, websites, and clips from YouTube; organized by Lexile score; differentiated or translated with a click; and tracked by parents and administrators. The Harlem Renaissance poems you routinely taught in grade 10 are now replaced with a career- and college-readiness curriculum. Because students and their needs change each year, teaching has always meant aiming at a moving target, but now it feels as though the target's rocketing around like fireworks and we're shooting muskets.

If your school is conscientious, these changes will be forecast well in advance; you will have training in the requirements, both software and hardware; and you will be offered follow-up professional development that will reinforce the skills needed for new procedures and materials. In practice, however, few schools can quickly effect this kind of extensive training, and another stressor for you as a teacher is the need to hurry up, catch up, and do the new thing very well *right now*.

In addition, the move across industry for employers to stop providing training and instead to require that employees keep up on their own has migrated into teaching. Our profession is not immune to these changes in industry standards. In Ken's home state of

New York, for example, recent legislation has shifted the requirement for school systems to offer or approve teachers' continuing education credits to state-approved (outside) providers. It's now entirely up to individual teachers to find, achieve, and keep the records for the 100 hours of professional development they must accomplish every five years to keep their professional certification active. This is a new ball game.

## CHANGES IN STUDENTS

Students also change. While verities of human nature endure, you have seen shifts in demographics in your school system and shifts in general student behaviors. Some of these are well documented and nationwide; some are more local. In Leila's home state of Virginia, there is a nearby school system that at one time was mostly rural and consisted of small farms, towns, and some suburban developments, all white and all middle class. It is now home to a large percentage of agricultural workers, people of color and second language speakers, whose low wages and seasonal work result in the stressors of working poverty and also in intermittent homelessness. For all the positives—students come to school with more than one language and with rich life backgrounds—there are some negatives, mostly related to economics. Food insecurity is now an issue in this county's schools as it never was before, and some students are routinely sent home during the weekend with backpacks filled with food. Ken knows of districts in his home of Long Island, New York, where young students are asked to take home "extra food" because it supposedly won't fit in the school's storage area; it's the only way some families can eat.

Along with these challenges come great advantages. A more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student body allows students to bring a larger range of experience and perspective to classrooms. Multilingual students enrich school discourse and exemplify the ability to think through different worldviews. So much more interesting literature is available from authors from different nations, cultures, and socioeconomic levels, all of which can inspire engaged class discussion among diverse students. In short, many schools now more closely resemble the dynamic, ever-shifting culture(s) that exists beyond the school walls.



The point is that teachers must adapt to all of these changes—positive and negative—as their students change. And even when these changes are inspiring and richly satisfying, the adaptation they require from teachers can be a source of some anxiety and even pressure.

There are also external pressures on teachers and school leaders. In a local school system in Leila's area, a decade of continued state sanctions for low test scores and lack of accreditation continues to churn changes in the schools' curriculum delivery and achievement reporting; the atmosphere of system-wide school failure is a stressor for many of the teachers and administrators, and the continuous turnover in staff and superintendents exacerbates the problem. For these educators, the consistent cycle of new plans and programs, once greeted with hope and enthusiasm, is now a source of concern, fatigue, stress, and even hopelessness.

In Ken's community of Long Island, with a population close to eight million, schools make headlines, some for achieving national academic recognition and others (as little as a few miles away) for violent gang warfare. Leila's Richmond, Virginia, area is not as much in the headlines, but many students and their families routinely experience gun violence, home invasions, and community disruption. From helicopter parents to drive-by shootings, the constant pressures teachers face take a toll as they focus on helping their students learn as much as they can in order to face a future full of uncertain promise and possibility.

Students are truly the only reason we English teachers do what we do. On the other hand, all of the changes in them, positive and challenging, create some level of stress on us as teachers. Teaching is a labor of love, but it is very much a labor. Perhaps only other teachers can truly understand that.

## **THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE WE ALL WISH WE HAD**

None of us can stop, change, or transform the landscape of American education and society. Certainly many of the forces that affect our classrooms on a daily basis are large ones, economic and demographic, and far beyond the scope of individuals, even when they band together as a group to speak with one voice. So, not surprisingly, nothing you read in this book will make these stressors go away or immediately transform your personal or profes-

sional life. Don't we wish we had that power! But there are ideas and strategies—and the companionship and wisdom of other teachers (such as Sonia Nieto's terrific 2003 *What Keeps Teachers Going?*)—to guide all of us. There is, indeed, help and direction to be found.

Imagine an ideal Teachers' Lounge, where along with the tables and refrigerator, the coffeemaker and the cups, we have a space where we are supported and safe, where we can talk about the changes in ourselves and in our school landscape that are not only concerning at times but that are also affecting our students and our sense of ourselves in the classroom. In that Teachers' Lounge are wisdom and insight as well as specifics about planning, grading, presenting, and selecting.

We would like this book to be, in a small way, something like what you would find in that ideal Teachers' Lounge. We, Ken and Leila, talk often to each other about our challenges and successes, and we find the conversations immensely rewarding and energizing. As you read further, you'll see that we've included in our ideal Teachers' Lounge many other voices from classroom teachers we admire and well-known English educators whose NCTE presentations are standing-room only. We think of the ideal Teachers' Lounge as a goal for this book because veteran teachers don't need step-by-step guidance or long explanations about best practices. They need quick advice, understanding, encouragement, and signposts pointing to innovations they can use in their classes. And they need these from teachers who respect their knowledge, experience, and time. This is the kind of Teachers' Lounge we all sometimes wish we had.

Leila recalls such a time:



**I DESPERATELY NEEDED** *such a Teachers' Lounge in my third year of teaching, when I had moved from a small Catholic high school to a large and boisterous public school. For me, the transition was beyond rocky, and even though I was aware that my students and I were clashing, that I was uneasy in my own classroom each*

*day, and that nothing seemed to help me get my footing, I hung on. One of the more maddening aspects of changing to this school was that the English department chair blithely insisted that everyone belong to the local English teachers' professional association, pay dues, and attend the occasional meeting. The first Saturday I found myself in the stark, overlit cafeteria of Cave Spring High School, seated with other veteran English teachers and asked to share, I was both irritated and scared. I had nothing positive to say, just a litany of failure and fear. So when my time came to speak, I sketched something fairly grim and waited for the ensuing criticism. And it did not come. The teachers in that group were well aware of what I had described, had dealt with something similar themselves, and also had some few mild suggestions. As Maya Angelou so famously remarked, "People will forget what you told them, but they will never forget how you made them feel," and this group made me feel relieved, better about myself, understood, and even hopeful. I continued to come to those meetings, utterly reaffirmed.*

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That is the kind of Teachers' Lounge we want for you. This is the kind of Teachers' Lounge we hope you will find in this book.

Imagine, for example, you've had a long day in the classroom. Not a bad day, just long. Everything went fine but was uninspiring. You wonder what it means to have taught for several years and to have so many more ahead of you. How do you face this? What new goals can you reach for? Who except a fellow or sister teacher understands the malaise that can build from the exhaustive repetition of the school day? Before you head home, you stop in the Teachers' Lounge for a cup of tea for the ride home. You crack open the door, and Penny Kittle is sitting there, waiting to chat with you. Penny Kittle, the highly respected author of *Book Love* and *Write Beside Them!* You ask your colleague, "Penny, how do I stay inspired as a teacher?"



FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

*Earn the Title Every Day*

Penny Kittle

*Kennett High School, North Conway, New Hampshire*

*Teaching requires heroic persistence.*

*Parker Palmer, author of The Courage to Teach, says there is a tragic gap between what is and what we know could be. You will see that gap in your teaching and in your students. Being a better teacher means you build a bridge to reach every student, plank by plank, day by day.*



*First, be in love with your content—and remember that love will dim without attention. 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. Keep reading, exploring, thinking, and questioning. Listen to your students and learn from them. Believe in better, not perfect.*

*This work is labor intensive and even more so, cognitively and academically rigorous. Your brain will be lit up all day and it will get tired. You need rest and music and good things to eat. Find people who love this work and cling to them, celebrate with them, and run to them for help. Look for opportunities to move our profession forward. And if you can't see them, create them.*

*Last, assumptions about students are dangerous. Kindness takes time, but every day you model how to live, and students are watching. Love begets love: the more you give, the more that comes. This is a life*

*lesson, of course, but teaching is life work. You are a role model, and that comes with the awesome responsibility to show up and earn that title every day.*

*Be someone to believe in. Bridge the gap.*

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An ideal Teachers' Lounge is a place where real support is offered. A high school teacher, in a recent NCTE Connected Community online discussion group, reached out to ask for help to address the extreme burnout she was dealing with. The description of her situation was pointed and compelling, and it generated much discussion within the online group at the time. We reprint here from the online discussion teacher Deborah Alvarez's six-point answer to her colleague. It is a heartfelt and gifted response, timely, positive, and wholly supportive. For us, teachers like Alvarez would be the center of our ideal Teachers' Lounge:

I have been there. It is not a pleasant place to be. I have listed some things that I had to do when I was faced with this. I hope that it helps you to renew and replenish your teaching life:

First, you have to remember that you have options. Those options may include moving to another school district, changing your job entirely. These are not the only options, but I want you to think that you are NOT stuck and consider your options. Go online and see what a professional job hunter might be able to do for you. Just look . . . see if anything strikes you. Sometimes, by entertaining that you have options, you discover what you may want to do to make a living.

Second, extricate yourself from the drama at the school. Teach and engage with those aspects of the school day that give you joy, and then leave the school to engage in other things that are fun for you and your family. Take a yoga class, learn to make pottery. We have to break the cycle of stress/drama that often surrounds us at school. Then, do something that gives you some joy and comfort.

Third, remember why you became a teacher. That passion and commitment are really stressed right now, and you need a break in order to find that

love again. It may not be easy to see this right now, so it will take time. You commented that you are working on board certification. So, I am assuming you love teaching the children; it's all the other "stuff" that is getting in your way. Too much drama! Eliminate what you can and don't participate in the drama.

Fourth, find other friends and people and fellow teachers . . . who provide you with laughter and a positive view. Being constantly reminded of the woes and drama every day by our fellow adults only exacerbates what we are feeling. You may have to change your behavior—adolescents bring enough drama every day. Find a good friend to talk to, and admit your feelings. . . .

Fifth, this will not change without your commitment to making the change. Nothing changes without doing something for yourself. Once you take control of this, you will be able to find a way to enrich yourself.

Sixth, what do you want for your work life? If you can define it, then you can find a position that will fulfill that. Once I began looking for an alternative to enrich myself and fill what I felt was an empty vessel, I had an improved attitude. The improved attitude will allow you to see things more clearly and make choices that are better for you. . . . This summer do something that is personally fulfilling . . . go camping, join a group, do something for yourself!!! You deserve this. It is so important to find a source of replenishment for your teaching soul and relief from the stress.

I hope this helps you to set you on a path to rejuvenate your spirit. You are not alone in this.

Good colleagues are often the best source of solace, understanding, and truly helpful advice. In an "*EJ* in Focus" article, Nancy Mack described nine ways to keep up your "Energy and Enthusiasm" as a teacher:

1. Identify What Makes You Happy in Your Classroom
2. Keep Learning from Your Students
3. Cherish Your Literacy [read and write what you love]

4. Find the Courage to Develop New Ideas
5. Find Joy in What Students Accomplish
6. Seek Things Other Than School That Give You Energy
7. Find Ways to Gather Positives [keep a journal, for example]
8. Claim Your Own Mentors
9. Decide to Think, Feel, and Act Differently [take control] (18–25)

Classroom teacher Mike Anderson provides in *The Well-Balanced Teacher* his list of four teacher nonnegotiables: teachers need to **belong** (feel positive connections both inside and outside of school); feel they are **significant** (and make a positive difference); be **engaged** (which generates energy and passion); and be **balanced** (creating routines and setting boundaries so they are not overwhelmed). These four strike us as helpful as we think of the strength—and the challenges—of being a veteran teacher.

And, while it may seem counterintuitive, there is also wisdom in reminding ourselves that, yes, we are teachers but we are also *more than* teachers. Veteran teacher Marie Gist writes of something she learned about her sense of self and the classroom:

Let yourself off the hook.

This is not an exercise in mediocrity, but an allowance.

You deserve to breathe.

You **need** to have a life.

Bottom line: You deserve to be something other than a teacher. . . . Allowing yourself to have a life means that you are not shut off in your teacher hole. You exist outside of the school and interact with the “real world” you so frequently tell your students they will one day be a part of. A “real world” that, by the way, your students live in. We need to abandon this phrase altogether.

I get my best ideas about teaching when I am being present in my life, not from scanning Pinterest or sifting through teacher blogs. These resources

are great for developing lessons or retooling something you felt didn't land, but in order to be a force in the classroom you need to be present in your life. By reminding yourself of who you were before teaching, your authentic self will seep into the classroom. You don't need to be anyone other than who you are—a message we often tell our students, but frequently ignore ourselves. (Gist personal communication, 2017)

## THEN AND NOW

We are not alone. And all of us have our stories. On the NCTE website, “Then and Now” was an idea Leila had as part of her work to celebrate NCTE's 100-year anniversary. She asked teachers to write a very short piece highlighting one aspect of their teaching—*I used to \_\_\_\_\_, but now I \_\_\_\_\_* was the frame. She invited teachers to contrast who they were when they started teaching and who they are now. In the context of this opening conversation, three of those voices are especially pertinent to our Teachers' Lounge and how we become better teachers. The first voice is that of Sarah Brown Wessling, from Johnston High School in Johnston, Iowa, who wrote about her teaching:

My passion for learning and teaching grows stronger with each passing day and experience. On the other hand, while passion may be a good place to start, it leaves the potential for a lot of gaps, so in the past nine years I've been filling them in, building bridges, and seeing the landscape of teaching and learning through a kaleidoscope rather than binoculars. In past years, I had to worry about the details. I'm not ashamed of that; the details were small and manageable places to begin, a foothold for the passion. But I worried about the kinds of details that can inhibit instead of inspire good teaching. I worried about the tardy passes, all the right forms, and the careful—nearly robotic—construction of a lesson.

While there is still important work in the details, crevices that need to be packed, now the details are different. I notice the inconsistency of a student smile, the subtle shift in a reading habit, the nuanced voice in a piece of writing,



and the way in which I can provide guidance and feedback to each student's learning process. I've learned to channel my passion so that it fuels enthusiasm and steady pursuit of learning goals. I now see the kaleidoscope of each learner—brilliant chips of color, constantly making patterns and creating pieces of art.

And, from Sarah L. Morris, Berkeley Springs High School in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, her “Then and Now” directly related to herself as a student and young woman:

I once thought being a teacher was being a superhero. Instead of a magic lasso, I'd have a textbook; I'd step out of library stacks transformed. My students would see the “teacher me.” I maintained the charade my first years. My classes were behaved, organized, and silent. The information was most important, and my task was deliver, assess, and raise student achievement.

Eventually, I realized my ideas about identity were related to my teenage years—because I was different, I was not able to express myself in ways that enabled learning. If I embodied the perfect teacher stereotype, my kids wouldn't see my learning struggles. But accepting the idea that there was one kind of good teacher required perpetuating the idea that there is one kind of good student, which I knew wasn't true. If I believed this I would be rejecting my teen self, still there, hiding behind the dress and heels.

Development of identity parallels intellectual development, and if we are unsure of ourselves we cannot succeed fully. My eccentricity is inspiring, and students can learn to be who they are by accepting diversity in me. Now, the first time a student says, “Ms. Morris, you are sooo weird,” I know the real learning can begin.

And finally, something we talk about more later, from classroom teacher Amy E. Harter [Casey] of Sheboygan Falls High School, Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, whose mantra, *the joy stays consistent*, is a call to action for all of us:

I'll never forget the wave of certainty that washed over me in an urban classroom, packed wall to wall with eighth graders, on September 16, 2008. That was it. I

knew I was a teacher. From that first day of student teaching, I felt a joy that motivated me—the joy of hearing students read their writing in their own voices, of seeing them debate and uphold new ideas. I witnessed, with captivation, emerging power in my students to impact their communities and become incredible scholars.

Since then, I've learned thousands of things about effective practices, classroom management, curriculum design, and assessment. I've changed to respond to different schools, students, and initiatives. Looking to the future, I know my career will be an evolution. But even after all the changes, *the joy stays consistent*. That unchanging aspect of teaching is the thread holding the shifting world of my career together. [Emphasis added]

## A DISCUSSION STARTER

Consider the list in Figure 1.1, compiled by some of Leila's preservice students regarding what they wish they had known before they began their lives in the classroom. How many of these are things you too wish you had known? How many are things you are still dealing with? Are some of these your stressors? Take five minutes to use this checklist to see what you find.

### Twenty-Five Things I Wish I Had Known

CHECK ONE OF THE THREE AND RANK THE STRESSOR FROM 1 TO 10, 10 BEING THE HIGHEST

	WISH I HAD KNOWN	ALREADY KNEW	NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT	STRESSOR
More classroom management techniques				
How to deal with/or teach students with disabilities or English language learners				
How physically demanding it would be				
How many red pens I would need				
How challenging the students can be				

Who in the school I can confide in				
That you have to “sell” everything you teach				
How to keep up with students who are absent				
The need to give clear, concise directions				
How to deal with different abilities in the same class				
That I wouldn’t be GREAT all the time and it wasn’t expected of me				
That I would literally lose my social life and still enjoy my life!				
That I have to repeat everything 5-10 times				
That grading takes even longer than anticipated				
That I need to call parents frequently and be open to their suggestions				
That students have bigger problems than my class and that’s reasonable				
That not everyone likes reading and writing				
That if a student sees the activity is relevant to them they don’t ask, “Why are we learning this?”				
That students may not pay attention no matter what I do and that I will say directions in a dead quiet room and no one will hear				
How exhausting it is				
How to keep records				
How to write on a board				
How to be angry				
How to transition				
That reflection does help				

FIGURE 1.1. “Twenty-five Things I Wish I Had Known” list.

How did you do? Our hunch is that you checked more “Wish I had known” items than “Already knew” or “Never thought about it” items. We also suspect that there are a number of items in the 5 and above range as stressors. These are areas of concern and, again, this book addresses them. Even with great preparation, motivation, and determination, being an ongoing and successful teacher asks a lot of all of us, year after year.

Consider using the results of this survey to search for blogs or books on the issues raised or to begin conversations with trusted colleagues or even trusted friends who aren't teachers. Feeling a general sense of anxiety or malaise or burnout can feel too big to change, but breaking such feelings down into their individual elements can help us understand and begin to ameliorate them. Veteran teachers are resilient, and one way they exhibit that resilience is by checking in with themselves and identifying and acknowledging their own needs.

## MENTORING

Many veteran teachers have revitalized their teaching and have felt renewed by mentoring new colleagues in their own schools, from local colleges (as student teachers), or through regional or national mentoring networks. Anna J. Small Roseboro, a National Board Certified Teacher, has taught high school in five different states and is now co-chair (with Claudia Marschall) of the Conference on English Education (CEE) Commission to Support Early Career English Language Arts Teachers (search the NCTE website for more information). This relatively new group is one you may wish to become involved in, especially if you are interested in mentoring new teachers. Anna is in the Teachers' Lounge now, where she explains why you might want to add mentoring to your professional life.



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### FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

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#### *Why Mentor?*

Anna J. Small Roseboro  
*Calvin College, Emerita*

*What better way to ensure the quality and success of our new colleagues than to mentor, for example, through the CEE Commission*

*to Support Early Career ELA Teachers?! Being a veteran teacher or even retiring need not be the end of your growth as a teacher. Most of us know that teaching English is both the most important and the toughest profession, since success in every profession depends on some knowledge and skills in reading and writing, speaking and listening. We veteran teachers know our content, yes, but we have also developed insight and skills to adapt what we know in ways that inspire our students to learn. And we've learned to balance our personal and professional lives.*



*If knowledge, skill, and balance were the only concerns, teaching would not be nearly so challenging. Learning to navigate the shoals of administration, school cultures, and changing political winds is perhaps even more crucial to the success of early career educators. Adjustments, adjustments, adjustments. A new teacher's inability to adjust quickly causes the endemic dropout within those first five years in the profession.*

*Veteran educators can stem the flight of passionate, intelligent newcomers by offering ears to listen, and time to share stories. We can offer factual evidence from our years of experience—and our shoulders to cry on and arms to hug. We can cheer on our new teachers, coach them from the sidelines, and celebrate their achievements, as they surely will come.*

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Throughout this text, you'll learn different ways to approach teaching and you'll hear many other teachers offering support and advice. If you enjoy the conversations we've begun, you can use them to begin new conversations with trusted colleagues. Mentoring new teachers or organizing a group of veterans to discuss new ideas is a great way to take your own teaching to the next level.

## CONCLUSION

Veteran teachers are the backbone of a school, and students stand on their shoulders. As teachers, teacher educators, and administrators, we know that the teacher-student relationship is what school is all about. Veteran teachers are the most likely agents of change for students and schools and the most practical first responders to changes in students and schools. This book honors the responsibility, the power, and the knowledge that veteran teachers bring to their work. Veteran teachers are not hostages to change; they accept, resist, harness, and adapt to change in all the ways that benefit students.

Teaching is a continuing journey, and during your time in the classroom your control can ebb and flow. You yourself have changed; your life has become more complex. In addition, your own classroom, school, and school district perpetually alter with new initiatives, ideas, and materials for which you are not always well prepared or occasionally about which you are not especially enthusiastic. But 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? In the area of teaching literary texts, what will help you become a better teacher? We turn to this in the next chapter.

Finally, we note the chapter-opening epigraph. The lines are from an iconic American poem but also part of the philosophy of the Hindu holy text the *Bhagavad Gita*. In his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot refers consistently to Hindu philosophy, and the point is simply that we should pay much less attention to the results of what we do and the perfection of what he calls “faring well” than simply to the act of continuing on, “faring forward.” This is not meant as a retreat from standards or excellence but a simple acknowledgment that the act of doing can, in and of itself, have its own reward and positive outcome. Our interpretation is that by *faring forward*, the *faring well* comes of its own accord. And when we are in the midst of a bustling, hectic day, with students coming in and out of our classrooms, the bells ringing, the announcements crackling over the loudspeaker, the laptops open, and the backpacks put away, faring forward may be the best life we can imagine.

Aimed at accomplished veteran teachers, *Continuing the Journey* offers practical advice, encouragement, and cutting-edge ideas for today's English classroom. Coauthors Leila Christenbury and Ken Lindblom, well-known teachers, writers, and former editors of *English Journal*, are joined in this book by almost two dozen classroom teachers and researchers. Together they present real strategies for real classrooms and offer teachers ideas, insights, and support. Focused on literature and informational texts, this lively book (the first in a series) is a road map to professional renewal and to becoming a better teacher. Topics include:

- Changes in you, your classroom, and your school
- What it means to be a better teacher
- Teaching literary texts and literary nonfiction
- Incorporating the study of informational texts and of social media in your classroom

An innovative feature of the book—the Ideal Teachers' Lounge—invites the voices of many highly regarded teachers and scholars to engage, inspire, and inform you about the challenging world of professional teaching. Vignettes from real classrooms infuse the book with practicality. Inviting, collegial, and knowledgeable, Leila and Ken share their experience, stories, and ideas flavored with drama and humor.

If you are a veteran English teacher, well beyond the first-year jitters and ready to focus fully on the success of your students and your own professional growth, *Continuing the Journey*, both book and series, is for you.

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