

Developing Academic Kinship, Meeting Rock Stars:

What ALAN and NCTE Offer English Educators

Who was with you in the classroom 10 years ago, as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) turned 90 years old? I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student at the University of Iowa, where my adviser, Dr. Bonnie Sunstein, encouraged me to track what she called my “academic kinship.” Periodically, she asked me to answer the question, “When you go into the classroom, who are the co-teachers you take with you?” In other words, who informs your teaching? Ten years ago, I responded with the names of the teachers and researchers whose work I was studying: Donald Murray, Donald Graves, James Moffett. I included the names of the teachers who were instructing me in these works: Bonnie Sunstein, Anne DiPardo, James Marshall. As I looked over that list, I felt well-supported—and less isolated—in the classroom.

Ten years later, as a teacher educator, I ask my own students to ponder the same question: “As you prepare to go into the secondary English language arts classroom, who are the co-teachers you take with you?” When they include my name on that list, I am humbled. By the same token, it causes me to face the power that I have as a teacher. I am influencing their menu of options for co-teachers. This causes me to think about where I shop for mentors for my students. Who are the must-reads in English education? How do I know? What informs my professional acumen? Whenever I make a decision about whose work to include on a course syllabus, I am essentially telling my students, “This individual is a potentially influen-

tial co-teacher. This person has something important to teach you about English education.” As a teacher educator, I do not take these choices lightly. I need to think carefully about the process that informs my curriculum.

Today, as NCTE has recently turned 100 and as ALAN turns 40, I am grateful for the ways in which NCTE and its affiliates inform my work in English education. I would feel much less supported—and much more isolated—without the co-teachers I have met through multiple professional venues. It is not surprising how many of these venues are connected to NCTE, namely CLAS and ALAN, two of my key kindred souls of the national organization. CLAS, or the Colorado Language Arts Society, is a state affiliate of NCTE. ALAN, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, holds its annual meetings during the NCTE Annual Convention. Because of ALAN and NCTE workshops and publications, I am able to provide new generations of teachers with high-caliber mentors. I am able to help future teachers develop their own academic kinships.

Describing and Developing Academic Kinship

An academic kinship is how an individual describes who and what influences that person’s teaching. It includes the intersections of the what and the how, the content and the pedagogy. For example, in my adolescents’ literature course, the texts I include on the

syllabus are the what: Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last*, and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The themes we address in class are the what: rape, pregnancy, and sexuality. Anderson is part of my academic kinship because I am affected by her writing style, by how she does and does not use dialogue. I am affected by how she weaves the impact of rape into adolescent identity. Johnson is part of my academic kinship because I am struck by how she puts a twist on stereotypes. I am struck by how she weaves the concept of responsibility into adolescent identity. Chbosky is part of my academic kinship because I am influenced by how he gives a voice to those who might not otherwise have one. I am influenced by how he infuses the importance of perspective into adolescent identity. That is why these authors and these texts are a part of my adolescents' literature course. They all have something significant to offer teachers and readers of adolescent literature. That is why they are a part of my academic kinship.

In addition to the content, academic kinship includes the pedagogy, or the how. When I teach Anderson's *Speak*, I introduce Rosenblatt's ideas about reader response. Rosenblatt is definitely a part of my academic kinship; she influences why I choose to teach students about the differences between New Criticism (the meaning is in the text) and Reader Response (the meaning is a transaction between the reader and the text). When I teach Johnson's *The First Part Last*, I teach deconstruction theory, so the students and I can examine how Johnson breaks down binary constructions, such as what it means to "be a man." Jacques Derrida and Warren Hedges are my co-teachers as I guide students through an examination of binary oppositions in the story, such as male/female, child/parent, teenager/adult. When I teach Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I call upon Mary Klages's work with queer theory as I encourage students to explore how identity is a social construct. Each of these pedagogical approaches has something meaningful to offer teachers and students. That is why they are a part of my academic kinship.

Academic kinship is kinesthetic, always in motion, always intersecting. It is influenced by the students I teach, the conference presentations I attend, and the journal articles I read. I might include one set of texts this semester, and I might teach the content

a particular way. By the next time I teach that same course, I might have attended a conference where I learned about a different text that meets my goals. I might have read a journal article that described a new teaching technique that helps me meet the students' needs in that course. That conference presenter and that author have the potential to be co-teachers in my classroom.

If I use their work or apply their ideas, they are part of my academic kinship.

The important part of applying academic kinship in the classroom is that my decisions need to be intentional. I need to have a rationale for why I am leaving one author in or leaving another text out. I need to understand what influences my decisions. When I ask *What informs my teaching?*, I answer *ALAN and NCTE*. They have much to offer English educators. *ALAN* and *NCTE* help me to teach deliberately.

Academic kinship is kinesthetic, always in motion, always intersecting.

Professional Conferences: Meeting the Sage on the Stage

As I work with preservice teachers, I try to model the importance of staying active in professional organizations. For me, this is one of the best ways to fight off burnout and to expand academic kinships. I describe attending a conference like summer camp for teachers: filled with fun activities to help you be a well-rounded person. Each year, I try to attend at least one state and one national conference, and I always try to take a group of graduate and undergraduate students as presenters and participants. For me, there is no greater joy than introducing a student to someone whose work we have been reading in class, or watching a student discover a potential co-teacher at a session. Professional conferences are one way to meet the rock stars of English education, the sages on the stage. They are also a way to interview potential co-teachers.

In my school context, we are fortunate to have the Colorado Language Arts Society, a wonderfully vibrant state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. In the fall of 2010, I had the distinct pleasure of hearing Teri Lesesne, "the Goddess of YA Literature" and the Executive Secretary of *ALAN*,

speak at the Colorado Language Arts Society Fall Conference. Before her keynote speech, I was familiar with her name, but not her work. Early in the session,

I had one of those magical moments where I was able to introduce one of my students to one of my mentors.

she posed two important questions to the audience: 1) What could someone do *before* you read to make you want/hate to read? 2) What could someone do *after* you read to make you want/hate to read? As I sat there, completely caught up in Lesesne's ideas about how to encourage reading for enjoyment—pure enjoyment—I couldn't help but think about my students, future teachers, who not only grapple with the questions Lesesne asked, but who are also trying to discover ways to answer their own questions, questions all teachers ask, such as, "What can I do to help students *want* to read?"

The light bulb went on: my students would definitely benefit from reading Lesesne's work. She would make an excellent candidate for a co-teacher in my teaching reading course. In my conference program, I made notes about how her work could inform the course curriculum. I jotted down titles she recommended for creating and sustaining engaged readers, including Jacobson & Colón's *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* (2010), Yang's *The Eternal Smile* (2009), and Benoit's *You* (2010). I annotated her explanation of T-A-R-G-E-T, outlining the importance of Trust, Access, Response, Guidance, Enthusiasm, and Tween and Teen Appeal for adolescent readers.

In my teaching reading course, I often use Pennac's "Reader's Bill of Rights" (1999, pp. 170–171) as an introduction to how to use fishbowl discussion as a way to engage students in conversation about what they have read. Lesesne offered new rules for readers, such as "You have the right to read the last chapter first." I brainstormed ways Lesesne's work could complement Pennac's work in my classroom. I was mapping out a revised academic kinship, one where Pennac intersects with Lesesne, who intersects with me, and ultimately with a new generation of teacher

candidates. In that moment, Teri Lesesne became one of my co-teachers and a potential mentor for students back at Colorado State University. In that moment, I was reminded that academic kinship is all about intersections.

The CLAS Fall Conference increased my excitement for attending the 2010 NCTE Annual Convention in Orlando, Florida, one month later. At the CLAS Conference, I met new co-teachers; at NCTE, I was reunited with past co-teachers. I attended a Conference on English Education (CEE) session explaining composition's roots in English education. The presenters were NCTE Past President Sheridan Blau, then NCTE President Keith Gilyard, and my graduate adviser, Bonnie Sunstein. Past co-teachers mingled with the possibility of new mentors as I prepared to listen to these talented, invested English educators read excerpts of their upcoming work in Patricia Lambert Stock's *Composition's Roots in English Education* (Heinemann, 2011).

My "rock star" moment came before the presentation even started. I walked into the room and sat down next to one of my current graduate advisees, Serena Dietze, who was then president of NCTE@CSU, the CSU student affiliate of NCTE. We chatted briefly, and I explained that Bonnie had been my adviser, as I am Serena's adviser. We walked up to Bonnie, and I had one of those magical moments where I was able to introduce one of my students to one of my mentors. In that moment, I experienced a profound connection between Iowa and CSU, between CLAS and NCTE, between past and present. I saw my academic kinship come full circle.

I had been recommending that Serena read some of Bonnie's work, coauthored with Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996), in preparation for her master's thesis. Now, I was having one of those treasured moments where I was introducing a student to someone whose work she had read. But this was even more than that. I was introducing two people who have profoundly affected my own academic kinship. I was introducing two people who have, at some point in my professional career, helped me to feel more supported and less isolated. This is the power of academic kinship; this is the potential that ALAN and NCTE offer to English educators.

Academic Journals: Meeting the Sage on the Page

As teachers, we do not always have the time, the money, or the opportunity to attend a professional conference. That does not mean we are limited in ways to expand our academic kinship. ALAN and NCTE both offer high-quality journals where we can meet new co-teachers in our own homes, on our own schedules. Many of these journals feature work written by the same people who are presenting at state and national conferences. Two of the most influential journals for my academic kinship have been *The ALAN Review* and *English Journal*.

Teaching the adolescents' literature course at CSU is one of my favorite yet most daunting challenges when it comes to selecting potential co-teachers for students. In the course of a 16-week semester, the students and I will read a minimum of 11 core texts. In addition, we each read 3,000 pages of adolescents' literature of our own choosing. In terms of volume, that sounds like a lot of reading. However, for those of us who understand the importance of adolescents' literature in the secondary English language arts classroom, we know that it is not nearly enough to expose students to the amazing range of authors and titles available.

As I prepare to order texts for the next semester's course, I ask current students, "What do you think are important topics to address in the adolescents' literature course?" Recurring suggestions include teen suicide, peer pressure, and mental illness. One semester, the students recommended that we address body image. As I thought about the range of texts I had read on that subject, from Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (1992) to Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), I needed to think about which resources would best inform my text selections. Luckily, I knew where to turn.

I knew that if I was looking for which authors to take with me into the classroom, I could trust *The ALAN Review* for solid recommendations. I knew I could search the ALAN website for resources related to the topic of body image, and that is how I came across articles like Peterson's "Teens, Literature, and the Web" (2004), which called my attention to Carolyn Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (2005). As I researched the author and

the text, I started to see how this book could have a place in the adolescents' literature course. I started to see how Mackler could be a potential co-teacher in the classroom.

My next step was to think about what I wanted to accomplish with the text. I wanted students to do more than read about body image; I wanted them to be affected by the reading, and to be able to apply what they learned in their own classrooms. Since the adolescents' literature course meets three times per week, I organize the syllabus into three components: theme, theory, and issue. On day one (Monday), we examine theme, such as body image. On day two (Wednesday), we apply literary theory, such as feminist theory. On day three (Friday), we explore a larger issue related to teaching, such as censorship. Once I read Mackler's book, I was hooked. I knew her work definitely fulfilled students' wants and curricular needs.

As I planned how to address censorship related to the book, I consulted *The ALAN Review* once again, and I read Quick's "'Meant to Be Huge': Obesity and Body Image in Young Adult Novels" (2008). Quick's work helped me to select other journal articles and newspaper clippings to inform our examination of the relationship between censorship and Mackler's work.

At the end of the semester, I asked students to evaluate each of the required texts we had read. I asked them, in writing, to tell me which texts they thought I should keep in the curriculum and which I should replace. Male and female students alike praised *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* as one of the most important reads of the semester. Some of those students have gone on to teach Mackler in their own classrooms. Thanks to *The ALAN Review*, the students forged a significant academic kinship with that text and with that author.

As luck would have it, I was able to meet Carolyn Mackler at the 2010 NCTE Annual Convention in Orlando. I had the opportunity to tell her, in person, how much her work had meant to me and to the students in that course. I was able to shake hands with yet another co-teacher.

I knew where to turn. . . .
I could trust *The ALAN Review* for solid recommendations.

We do not always get to meet the authors who have meant the most to us. Sometimes we have to be content to worship our English education rock stars from afar.

We do not always get to meet the authors who have meant the most to us. Sometimes we have to be content to worship our English education rock stars from afar, perhaps forming our own informal fan clubs at our schools, in our classrooms. For example, I had never met Ken Donelson, Alleen Pace Nilsen, or

James Blasingame, yet they were a part of my academic kinship. (I was finally able to meet James Blasingame at the CLAS conference this past fall.) I seek out their articles in *The ALAN Review* and in *English Journal* to help inform my work as an English educator. I trust and appreciate their annual recommendations in articles such as “The 2005 Honor List: A Wealth of Books to Compare”

(2006). And I still enjoy reading Nilsen’s assertion that Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* should come with a warning label: “Read and enjoy—but please do not think you are a failure if your boyfriend is not as wonderful as Edward Cullen” (p. 95). This is sound advice, and this is why Nilsen and Meyer are co-teachers in my classroom.

Other times, we are fortunate enough to call the authors we meet on the pages of our professional journals colleagues, or even friends. I consider myself fortunate to work with former *English Journal* editor Louann Reid, alongside fellow *English Journal* authors Cindy O’Donnell-Allen and Tobi Jacobi. I have been honored to present with all three of these women at state and national conferences. They are an intricate part of my academic kinship, and our connections to CLAS and NCTE strengthen those bonds.

Sometimes, when we are truly fortunate, we get to share our academic kinship with others in a venue such as a professional journal. Sometimes, we get to introduce others to the sages on the stage in our own lives, immortalizing them as the sages on the page. Through my work with classroom teachers in Colorado, I became interested in how teachers meet educational mandates while staying true to what they know is best for their students. I wanted to take an active role in a conversation about how secondary

English language arts teachers can be vital contributors to how we, as a profession, use multiple assessments to more accurately measure students’ growth and achievement.

Two high school English teachers, Hillary Pfeiffer and Dee Hurston, opened their classroom doors to me so that I could research how they were using innovative strategies such as Socratic seminar and sticky notes alongside other assessment tools to assess what their students knew and were able to do. They allowed me to publish their approaches in *English Journal*. In doing so, they allowed me to preserve, in writing, how they had become a part of my academic kinship. In my own courses, I model their approaches to new generations of teachers. In my conclusion, I observed, “Most of all, however, [Hillary and Dee] are fighting the good fight, fighting to ensure that students become less like sponges and more like the active questioners and critical thinkers we all need them to be in the twenty-first century” (Coke, 2008, p. 33). Because I had a venue such as *English Journal*, I was able to share why it is important for students to be active questioners and critical thinkers. Because of *English Journal*, a publication of NCTE, I was able to share how Hillary and Dee informed my teaching. In turn, they likely had an impact on other *English Journal* readers as well. As that occurred, my academic kinship intersected with the kinship of other readers, helping us to feel more supported and less isolated.

Looking Ahead: Where the Stage Intersects with the Page

In 2007, Thomas Newkirk had the daunting task of writing an “In Memoriam” column in *English Journal* about Donald Murray, a man who had been his friend and mentor. Newkirk described how, as often as Murray had tried to describe his writing process, it was always the elusive, unexpectedness of the process that captured his interest. “Writing was something that was not ‘controlled’ by a plan, an intention, a genre, a rubric; rather he saw the evolving text as an animate partner in a dialogue” (p. 14). The emphasis was on the animate quality—“expecting the unexpected.”

It seems only fitting that I should close where I opened, with Donald Murray. His philosophy holds equally true for academic kinship as it does for writing process. Finding a co-teacher cannot be controlled by

a plan. I cannot attend a conference or read an article and state, “From this source, I am going to find a co-teacher.” Academic kinship evolves. It stems from developing an animate partnership in a dialogue.

Alas, I am not going to ask, “Ten years from now, whom do you see with you in the classroom?” You have no way of knowing. Life is not controlled by a plan. However, I can offer you this gem of advice. If you are seeking to develop your academic kinship, and you want some safe bets about where to meet high-quality mentors, you can examine the intersections of ALAN and NCTE. If you are looking to meet the rock stars of English education—or if you want to be one of the rock stars of English education—attend or present at an ALAN workshop or NCTE convention; read or publish an article in *The ALAN Review* or *English Journal*. I will be watching for your work. If you want to feel more supported and less isolated in your classroom, sit down and answer the question, “Who informs my teaching?” For the length of my career thus far, I have been fortunate to have ALAN and NCTE informing my teaching. I am honored to have these resources at my disposal as I help future teachers develop their own academic kinship.

Pam Coke is an associate professor of English Education at Colorado State University. She teaches courses in adolescents’ literature, teaching reading, teaching composition, and teaching methods. She is faculty sponsor of NCTE@CSU, a student affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English.

References

- Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Benoit, C. (2010). *You*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.
- Chbosky, S. (1999). *The perks of being a wallflower*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.
- Chiseri-Strater, E., & Susteian, B. S. (1996). *FieldWorking: Reading and writing research* (1st ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Coke, P. K. (2008). Uniting the disparate: Connecting best practices and educational mandates. *English Journal*, 97(5): 28–33.
- Derrida, J., & Caputo, J. D. (Eds.). (1996). *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Donelson, K., Blasingame, J., & Nilsen, A. P. (2006). The 2005 honor list: A wealth of books to compare. *English Journal*, 96(1): 90–96.
- Hedges, W. (2006, January 25). *Derrida and deconstruction: Key points*. Retrieved from <http://www.sou.edu/english/Hedges/Sodashop/Rcenter/Theory/People/derdakey.htm>.
- Jacobson, S., & Colón, E. (2010). *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank house authorized graphic biography*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Johnson, A. (2003). *The first part last*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.
- Klages, M. (2006). *Literary theory: A guide for the perplexed*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Lamb, W. (1992). *She’s come undone*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.
- Lesesne, T. (2010). Naked reading: Discovering how to motivate students to read. *The goddess of YA literature: Pearls from the goddess*. Retrieved from <http://professornana.livejournal.com>.
- Mackler, C. (2005). *The earth, my butt and other big round things*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Newkirk, T. (2007). In memoriam: Donald Murray. *English Journal*, 96(4): 14–15.
- Pennac, D. (1999). *Better than life*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Peterson, K. (2004). Teens, literature, and the web. *The ALAN Review*, 31(3): 7–10.
- Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Quick, C. S. (2008). “Meant to be huge”: Obesity and body image in young adult novels. *The ALAN Review*, 35(2): 54–61.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1996). *Literature as exploration*. New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.
- Stock, P. L. (2011). *Composition’s roots in English education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Yang, G. L. (2009). *The eternal smile*. New York, NY: First Second.