



The (Ir)relevance of English at the Turn of the Millennium

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Not long ago, looking in a bookstore sale bin, I came across a volume called *The Irrelevant English Teacher*. Written by J. Mitchell Morse, who is identified on the jacket as full professor of English at Temple University and “well-known Joyce scholar,” and published in 1972, *The Irrelevant English Teacher* is clearly a product of its time. On the first page of the first chapter, which is called “The Case for Irrelevance,” Morse refers to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, and in the following pages he mentions Stokely Carmichael, George Wallace, and H. Rap Brown. Not surprisingly, the book is cast in political terms, and in that first chapter Morse unabashedly identifies himself as a liberal. He also asserts that the best thing a teacher of English can do for liberalism is to ignore it. Morse’s justification for such an assertion is that “as a teacher of literature, I think it is vitally important for my students to develop some sensitivity to literary values” (4). The lack of concern with such values by our society, he writes, “has had unfortunate effects on the whole quality of its life, including its moral quality and ultimately its political quality” (5). To put it simply, Morse argues that we English teachers serve society best when we teach its children to read carefully, speak articulately, and write clearly, because if they can do these things, then they can think clearly, too. And if they can do that, he says, they will be less susceptible to the kind of political demagoguery that he describes as characteristic of his era. “If the next generation continues its wordless descent into mere inarticulate feeling,” he writes, “it will soon be politically

helpless” (122). The real job of the English teacher is thus to help students become politically astute not by teaching politics but by teaching literature.

Despite its lack of our currently fashionable jargon about agency, cultural critique, and hegemony, Morse’s argument is one we still hear in various guises today. I am thinking here of obvious public figures like William Bennett but also of scholars like James Battersby, who has argued against overtly (left-leaning) political pedagogies in the English classroom, and Maxine Hairston, who has made similar arguments in the context of the teaching of composition. Their assumptions about what English studies should be (and about how English should be taught) are not very different from Morse’s. Indeed, the notion that the careful study of carefully selected literary works and intensive instruction in “clear” writing are good for students and necessary for society has been put forth by English professionals from the time in the late nineteenth century when the modern English department began to emerge from the remnants of classics and rhetoric departments. But what interests me most about Morse’s obscure book is the fact that he squarely confronts the question of the relevance of academic English in the context of the political turmoil of his time and asserts unequivocally that English is perhaps the *most* relevant of academic pursuits. Indeed, he argues that English studies need not assert its relevance either by adopting overtly political pedagogies or by offering politically-oriented content. For Morse, the relevance of English is implicit and defined not in terms of applicability to current political controversies or particular job-related skills or even the specific interests of students; rather, relevance is a matter of fostering the timeless and universal values of clear thought and expression. These, he says, apply in all venues of social and political life and thus are always profoundly relevant.

By today’s standards (and despite Morse’s self-proclaimed liberal politics), many readers would likely characterize Morse’s stance as “conservative” or “foundationalist.” His argument suggests, for instance, that he would oppose the kind of first-year composition course that generated so much controversy at the University of Texas a decade ago with its focus on “difference” (see Brodkey 1994), as well as the kinds of “critical

pedagogies” that have gained popularity in recent years. And yet Morse’s central point—that we help foster politically aware and active minds among our students if we teach a certain kind of writing and reading—resembles the arguments set forth by Brodkey and by proponents of critical pedagogies. They too argue that what we teach ultimately serves our students well in the political and cultural arenas; that is, we’re teaching them to be critically aware citizens who can read, write, speak, and think in ways that enable them to resist political domination or hegemony. That’s essentially what Morse argued in 1972. And that seems to have become in some basic sense the primary justification we have for English studies: academic English is about making “good” citizens. As James Berlin put it in his book *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996), “English studies has a special role in the democratic educational mission” (54); our primary objective, he says, is “developing a measure of facility in reading and writing practices so as to prepare students for public discourse in a democratic political community” (110). We teach the literacy that students must have in order to become active, participating citizens. That’s why we’re relevant.

The authors in this volume, an eclectic (though by no means comprehensive) collection of voices from secondary and postsecondary English education, wonder about the relevance of our English classes to the lives our students lead in a complex, rapidly changing, and increasingly technological world. It seems an appropriate moment to do so, as we begin a new millennium amid concern, both public and professional, that English as a discipline (indeed, institutionalized education in general) has not adequately responded to our students’ needs as literate persons at a time of profound social, political, economic, and technological change. We have been witnessing unusually intense public debate about the secondary and postsecondary school English curriculum. For instance, the controversy about English 306 at the University of Texas at Austin became, for a brief time in the early 1990s, a national cause celebre among conservative activists and commentators concerned that the study of English has become too radical, too political, too ideological (as if the teaching and study of English—or any subject, for that matter—are ever apolitical or

ideologically neutral). Just a few years later teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition (including Brodkey herself) are debating the very usefulness of required first-year composition courses for college students, arguing for their “abolition” partly on the grounds that they support exploitation of teaching assistants and adjunct faculty; meanwhile, many politicians and school administrators demand more attention to writing and other “basic skills” in college curricula, even as some schools move to eliminate “remedial” writing programs. In the late 1990s, controversy erupted over a policy in the Oakland (California) school district that allowed teachers to treat a nonmainstream dialect of English called “Ebonics” as a second language. Many of the most vocal critics of the policy (including Black leaders like Jesse Jackson) argued that students of color who spoke “Ebonics” could never succeed in school or business if they didn’t learn “standard” English. One clear implication of such criticisms is that the study of English is vitally important to students seeking academic and professional success. Many state education policy-makers seem to agree, and the last five or six years have seen renewed efforts across the country to implement standardized tests intended to ensure that all students are learning to read and write well enough to “compete” in the global marketplace. My own state of New York recently implemented a new more “rigorous” English exam, which eventually all high school students will have to pass in order to receive a diploma. And as I was finishing this introduction, I received a message from a former student, now living in Alabama, who described her experiences in fighting the efforts of local conservative activists to ban all books by Judy Blume from her school district’s curricula—one more local battle in the never-ending censorship war in which English teachers are often unwilling combatants.

All of these instances of controversy about the teaching of English seem to suggest that academic English is indeed relevant. Otherwise, who would bother to get involved in such intense battles? Our society continues to send us these obvious signals that it considers what we do important and relevant, and it does so in the context of social, cultural, economic, and technological change that seemed unimaginable even a decade or two ago. Yet our classrooms, our curricula, and the structure of our schools

have remained largely unchanged for most of the past century, despite various pedagogical reform movements, volumes of empirical research on writing instruction, and more theoretical arguments than we can cram into an ever-increasing number of professional journals and scholarly books. Meanwhile, professional discussions about what English studies should be proliferate in our journals and books, at our conferences, and in mission statements that we attach to curriculum documents and committee reports. Surely we English professionals spend much more time and scholarly energy writing and talking about who we are and what we do than is the case for teachers and scholars in most other disciplines. (I sometimes wonder, for instance, how many papers presented at the annual convention of, say, mathematics educators or biologists or even psychologists are devoted to questions of “disciplinarity”: What *is* biology? How do we define mathematics? Should we abolish psychology 101?) Maybe our endless self-examination is just a reflection of the condition of academic English as a “field” or “discipline” always in search of itself, always in need of defining its purpose and asserting its relevance. But perhaps one measure of the importance (or lack thereof) of this ongoing professional obsession with self-definition is this: not far away from the sale bin in the bookstore where I found Morse’s *The Irrelevant English Teacher* was a shelf labeled “Summer Reading,” heavy with familiar volumes to be purchased by high school students in order to complete their summer reading requirement for their impending English classes. I purchased my own summer reading books from a similar shelf in the early 1970s (about the time Morse’s book was published); my two high-school-aged sons and their classmates—and millions of other high school students around the United States—do the same three decades later. Morse argued that such reading, under the tutelage of a skilled English teacher, is precisely what students need in order to become capable, critical citizens; Battersby and Bennett and others make the same sort of argument today. Yet I wonder how much more relevant to a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old’s life is reading (and writing a “report” on) Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (a common title on today’s summer reading lists) as compared to, say, *The Catcher in the Rye* (a book I was required to read). In an age of virtual

realities, live television and Internet coverage of shootings at places like Littleton High School in Colorado, falling real wages for many segments of the population, the North American Free Trade Agreement (“NAFTA”), and burgeoning “e-commerce” activity, what purposes do our summer reading assignments—and our many time-honored literacy pedagogies—truly serve for our students? Do they indeed foster the kinds of literacy abilities that might enable our students to negotiate this often treacherous world?

This project began with a similar, though more forthright, question from a student I met on a visit to a high school near my home: “What’s the point?” she wanted to know, after listening to my enthusiastic pitch about writing and reading and technology. She sounded like a typical bored high school junior posing that tired question that every English teacher has tried to answer at one point or another, but her challenge to me suggested that there was more to it than that. The more I considered her arguments about the irrelevance of most of what she was asked to do by her English teachers, the more they sounded like my own concerns about the teaching of writing and reading in secondary and postsecondary schools. And there was something disturbingly incongruous about my own part in this enterprise we call English studies: so much of what I spent my professional time doing seemed far removed from what that young woman seemed to want—and need—from her English teachers. In sharing this story with colleagues at other schools, I began to sense a vague but unsettling concern among other English practitioners that perhaps this young woman is right: When we consider our work in light of students’ needs as literate persons in a complex and difficult world, there often seems little point to what we as English professionals do. Meanwhile, our professional work is often characterized by trends, what one of my colleagues has called “stargazing,” and direct participation in the all-pervasive system of curriculum management driven by large-scale assessment and textbook marketing that we sometimes decry in scholarly articles, books, and conference talks. (I do not in any way exempt myself from these criticisms, since I have also been a participant in these activities.) I am not so naive as to think that these are simple matters. These same professional activities that often seem so

counterproductive and even reactionary can also at times serve students' needs (as well as our own). "The system" that we sometimes wish to blame for these ills can enable as well as disempower; it is as complex as the activities of writing and reading themselves. Nevertheless, when I look at the work my own two high-school-age sons are asked to do by their English teachers; when I consider how mindless and meaningless much of it is and how removed it is from the day-to-day pressures they encounter as adolescents and the literacy challenges they face outside their classrooms; and when I compare their experiences in their classes to the experiences of the millions of other students, most of whom (our professional experience and research tell us) encounter the same sort of assignments—when I consider all this, I myself begin to wonder, What's the point?

A look back at the brief history of English studies reveals that we seem always to have been asking this question, though rarely do we seem to have reached anything approaching consensus on an answer to it. We may have come close around 1958. Then, in a kind of national panic over the successful Soviet launching of Sputnik, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided federal funds for education research, curriculum development, and teacher training under the assumption that effective education was essential to the preservation of America's stature as a superpower. Interestingly, that landmark legislation did not include English as one of the vital areas of study to be supported by federal funds, and that exclusion prompted English educators to make a case for their discipline as crucial to "the national interest." Three years later, the National Council of Teachers of English published *The National Interest and the Teaching of English*, which some commentators—see, for example, page 11 of Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987)—credit with convincing Congress to include English as a vital subject of study in schools (which Congress subsequently did in several related pieces of legislation). It seems a watershed, if short-lived, moment in the history of English as an academic discipline, bringing together conservative, traditionalist, moderate, liberal, and progressive educators in a rare moment of relative agreement about the importance of the study of

English in American society. More than forty years after the passage of the NDEA, however, no such consensus seems to exist among English educators about the purpose of what they do beyond the rather general idea that we educate students for citizenry. As Richard Ohmann has pointed out in an insightful essay called “English After the USSR” (1995), the world Americans inhabit is no longer structured around the “master narrative” of the grand struggle between Marxism and capitalism, as it seemed to be in 1958 and through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Sputnik seems as distant as detente—no closer to the concerns of contemporary students than a brief paragraph in a yellowing history textbook. The binary world of U.S. vs. USSR has given way to a multicultural world that challenges teachers of English to justify their traditional approaches to teaching writing and reading. And the students of those teachers inhabit a world of geopolitical confusion, of “downsizing” and economic “restructuring,” that can make Shakespeare seem about as important to them as Sputnik.

Amidst this apparent confusion, our professional journals are filled with discussions that map out what we *should* be doing as a profession even as accompanying pages of those same journals traverse ground as varied as literary study, professional and technical communications, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, linguistics, ethnography, philosophy, rhetorical history and theory, poetics, and grammar—to offer an incomplete list of “areas” we consider somehow to belong to or comprise English studies. Surely a map of our “field”—to the extent that we can call it such—would encompass varied terrain indeed, and its boundaries would be as uncertain as many of the alliances we seem to have created as we struggle for space within the changing environment of higher education. We debate the role of “theory” (whatever that means), the abolition of first-year composition, the shape (or existence) of the canon, in ways that reveal the complexity of our “field” and our uncertainty about it. In my former department I have witnessed political and ideological battles that might once have been described as “internecine” but that cannot lay claim to such a descriptor given the widely divergent understandings of “English studies” among the combatants. Those battles reflect similar tensions elsewhere. And if English educators seem unable to muster the kind of loose consensus about their field that their

counterparts were able to find in the early days of the Cold War, contemporary students may have cause to worry about what their English teachers have to offer them. What's the point? Indeed.

The contributors to this volume offer a variety of answers to that question. Those answers are not concerned with scholarly arguments about how to *define* English as an academic discipline. Rather, their focus is squarely on students: What might the study of English mean to them? How does it meet (or fail to meet) their needs as literate beings in a world increasingly defined by literacy? How does the English classroom relate to the lives our students lead outside it? How *should* it relate to those lives? Collectively, the contributors' purpose is not to offer a definitive or comprehensive answer to such questions, nor even to paint a representative picture of current thinking about such matters in our field, but rather to present what they believe they have learned as English teachers and scholars in order to examine our roles in the lives of our students and to explore the relevance of our work as literacy educators. No doubt this effort will raise further questions.

Victor Villanueva, for instance, considers the role of academic English in the perpetuation of racism in American culture—and the potential of English as a course of study for combating racism. For Villanueva, there is no avoiding the issue of racism in our increasingly multicultural and multiethnic society, and thus we must confront it squarely in our classrooms. English classrooms in particular, Villanueva suggests, given their focus on language and story and culture, have a responsibility to address this matter. To what extent might we English teachers represent the “utopian hope” for the radical change that Villanueva seeks in our racialized discourses and our ways of dealing with racial difference? To what extent is that our job? Answers—and disagreements—abound. But for Villanueva, the relevance of what we English teachers do is a function of the extent to which we can find ways to make our pedagogies address this kind of difficult challenge that we face in our society generally.

Juanita Comfort takes up that challenge in the specific context of graduate study in English (reminding us, along with Stephen North, that English studies also encompasses advanced

graduate study and professional preparation). For Comfort, the problems of racism and sexism emerge in the obstacles faced by women of color who struggle to gain acceptance in the academy even as they insist on retaining an identity that positions them at the margins of that academy. Like many of the authors in this volume, Comfort understands the power of language—and, in particular, written language—to construct identity and claim agency, but she helps us see an irony in the way that English studies, a discipline ostensibly concerned with that power of language, can be an oppressive space where language is used as a tool for exclusion rather than empowerment. Her calls for understanding within English studies of the differences represented by the women of color to whom she introduces us relates to Villanueva's desire to connect the English classroom to the larger social and cultural contexts within which we and our students live. And she reminds us that to make English "relevant" to our students is a complex and difficult challenge that may differ from one student to the next. Relevance in this field, Comfort eloquently insists, is as much about identity as it is about literacy.

Margaret Finders also addresses issues of difference as they emerge in English classrooms, though she expands the notion of "difference" to incorporate socioeconomic status and encourages us to consider it specifically within the context of adolescent peer culture. That culture, she argues, not only diverges in complex ways from many of the values implicit in our conventional secondary school curricula but also undermines many of our efforts as teachers to convey to students what we believe is most important about literacy. Finders wants us to see that the relevance of what we offer our students cannot be understood as separate from the culture they themselves construct and inhabit. Her perspective is not just another version of the view, often associated with 1960s liberalism, that we should incorporate popular culture into the English curriculum in the form of song lyrics and movies and such. Rather, Finders pushes us to see that students don't want to be patronized in that way; they want literacy instruction that makes a difference in their lives, that has material consequences for them, that challenges our own deeply held beliefs about literacy. And summer reading assignments don't seem to pass muster on that score.

Such questions about the relationship between English instruction and the culture at large run through many of the following chapters and make for a provocative framework for understanding the study of English. Gerald Graff examines what he sees as a mismatch between ways of arguing—and ways of thinking about argument and about discourse—that we value in school settings and ways of understanding the world that seem to characterize popular culture. This mismatch is at heart an epistemological matter, for it goes beyond discourse conventions to how we know and how we can say what we know. For Graff, any effort to make our curricula relevant to students, who do not leave culture at the door when they enter our classrooms, must take these epistemological issues into account. And he forces us to consider the possibility that what we offer students is really a version of *our own* ways of seeing the world that may have little relevance to the lives students lead. In a sense, Paula Mathieu and Jim Sosnoski address the same epistemological problem, but they focus directly on pedagogical practice. Like Graff, Mathieu and Sosnoski see a divergence between the ways of seeing the world that are valued in the classroom—in their case, a classroom characterized by a cultural studies pedagogy—and the ways of seeing that students bring to that classroom. They examine how this divergence plays out within a cultural studies approach to teaching English that, they argue, many students believe forces on them a kind of “moral imperative” and therefore should be resisted. However, Mathieu and Sosnoski make no bones about asserting that teachers adopting such an approach must overcome that resistance, because the view of the world that they offer students is one that they believe will serve students’ needs as citizens in a complex, media-driven culture. Indeed, they believe that cultural studies can offer students what they need in order to negotiate a treacherous world of discourse. In this sense, theirs is an overtly political pedagogy that defines relevance in terms of a pedagogy’s ability to give students a critical perspective on the culture they inhabit. Sarah Robbins offers a similar kind of pedagogy for middle-school students, one that draws on Paulo Freire’s ideas about critical literacy and its relationship to students’ lives outside the classroom. Although a number of critics have questioned the applicability of a Freirean pedagogy to

the American classroom (indeed, Steve North, whose essay appears in Part I of this volume, has raised such questions; see his “Rhetoric”), Robbins holds firm to the notion, central to Freire’s work, that literacy is about constructing the world and thus is unavoidably about ideology, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic context. Accordingly, Robbins describes a pedagogy intended to prepare students for participation in their communities as literate persons with a stake in making those communities egalitarian. All these writers may agree with J. Mitchell Morse that English studies is ultimately about preparing critically aware citizens, but they advocate overt attention to that project and they are not content to define it as the indirect result of the study of literature and “clear” writing.

Many of the contributors to this volume define relevance more specifically in terms of the lives of individual students trying to negotiate the challenges they face as people in a changing world. For Patricia Fox, Donald Tinney, Cristina Kirklighter, Juanita Comfort, and Kathleen Cheney, the English classroom is relevant only to the extent that it helps students meet those challenges as men and women, as adolescents and “nontraditional” students, as people of color and people displaced by economic developments over which they seem to have no control. For example, the women returning to school find in Fox’s classroom a place where they can construct stories of their often difficult lives in order to make sense of those lives and claim agency in them—lives deeply and often directly affected by the larger cultural developments about which Graff and Mathieu and Sosnoski write. Kirklighter offers a similar space for her students, who tell different versions of the same compelling stories that Fox’s students tell. For them, relevance arises from the effort to find meaning in such stories and to write new ones as well. Tinney’s high school students, too, write—and read—stories about living life, about finding one’s way through the confusion of contemporary culture. He casts his role as a keeper of such stories—stories that he believes his adolescent students need at a crucial moment in their lives as they struggle to make their lives meaningful to themselves and to understand how others find meaning in their lives. Cheney’s students are often much older than Tinney’s, yet they encounter the same obstacles and engage in the same struggles, often at unex-

pected but critical junctures in their lives. For all these teachers, despite obvious differences in their approaches to literacy instruction, English studies is about what it means to be human. In a sense, they all offer a traditional answer to the question of the relevance of English, but they do so in a decidedly contemporary context that may challenge our notions about our traditional pedagogies and curricula.

Many of Cheney's students, she tells us, come to her classroom after losing a job or despairing of making their current jobs meaningful. They come to her because of seemingly faraway events like the North American Free Trade Agreement or a corporate restructuring at their workplace. Such economic developments raise hard questions about what we, as English educators, can offer our students, who are subject to changes that don't seem explicable by rules that obtained in the postwar era described by Ohmann—rules that crumbled with the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is precisely such questions that concern Scott Leonard and, indirectly, Stephen North. Both wish to understand the relationship of English as a discipline to the economic and legal systems within which we live, and they seek relevance in that connection. Leonard's students will perhaps remind readers of Cheney's or Kirklighter's students, but he won't let us forget that his classroom exists within a capitalist system that is ultimately the reason many of his students sit before him. At the same time, he resists the idea that teaching English is a business. Relevance, for Leonard, cannot be measured in a kind of educational profit-and-loss statement, though he makes it clear that he sees institutionalized education doing just that. He clings to an idea that literacy—and literature—can somehow give students something more than a credential or a set of job-related skills. If not, then we can define our relevance only in economic terms after all. Which would be OK with North, who worries that notions about English as somehow transcendent of legal and economic realities can serve only to make our discipline *less* relevant to our students and to the society within which we work. North sees our work in contractual terms: we have a legal responsibility to prepare students as readers and writers for functional lives outside the academy—not, he makes clear, to perpetuate a discipline built upon our esoteric scholarly interests, a discipline that supports

itself through exploitative economic practices. In a sense, Mark Reynolds takes up similar issues, for his sense of the relevance of what teachers of English do is tied directly to the economic realities of students' lives. But Reynolds focuses on the specific institution of the two-year college, arguing that that institution is much more responsive—and thus more relevant—to those realities and to students' needs as citizens and workers in a changing economic landscape than are the universities whose English departments North criticizes.

Implicit in the concerns raised by Reynolds and Leonard about the relationship between the English curriculum and the changing economy is the profound impact of new technologies. What, for instance, might new computer technologies that seem to be reshaping the workplace and our culture in general mean for English studies in the coming decades? If we have indeed entered what scholar Jay David Bolter (1991) calls the “late age of print,” have we also entered a new era of English teaching, one defined by powerful new technologies for literacy? Ted Nellen, writing from the perspective of an experienced teacher who pioneered the use of computer technologies in a New York City high school, argues not only that teachers must incorporate these technologies into the English curriculum but, more provocatively, that evolving computer technologies should indeed be at the center of a radically reformed curriculum. Nellen sees the conventional English curriculum as essentially outdated and thus irrelevant to students' needs as literate persons, workers, and citizens in a culture that is currently being reshaped by rapidly developing computer-based communications technologies. Unlike many educators who worry that these developments compromise literacy, Nellen believes they represent new forms of literacy through which students can deepen their learning and expand their inquiry into their world. Nellen's vision will worry some readers who are skeptical of the kinds of claims he makes about the possibilities represented by these technologies. But he will perhaps force such readers to rethink their own assumptions not only about the ways in which English is relevant to students' lives but also about the nature of literacy and its place in the English curriculum.

Richard and Cynthia Selfe are acutely aware of some of the concerns that teachers harbor about technology, and they share

a worry that educators can be swept up by their own enthusiasm for the kinds of possibilities that Nellen sees in the new computer technologies. For them, the fundamental goals of a humanist education retain value in our changing world and must drive our efforts to design technology-rich pedagogies. They see technological change as inevitable, but they wish to find ways to shape these inevitable changes brought on by technology so that technology not only serves students' needs but *reflects* our most deeply held hopes for a just and equitable society. This is an ambitious vision for English teachers, one that implicitly defines relevance in terms of the extent to which the teaching of English ultimately contributes to such a society. In a sense, they share J. Mitchell Morse's wish for a better society, but unlike Morse they define a proactive role for English teachers in building such a society.

Valerie Drye and Kathleen Yancey share with Richard and Cynthia Selfe that belief in a proactive role for teachers in contributing to the building of a better world through the teaching of English. There is no denying the idealism that drives their arguments, which may make some readers uncomfortable. Yet my sense, reinforced by my interactions with teachers at all levels of education, is that such idealism remains a driving force in the profession of English teaching—despite the discomforting skepticism and worry that I described above. Like so many teachers I have known, like so many student teachers who have come through my undergraduate classes, like so many teachers we have all read about and met, high school teacher Valerie Drye entered the profession because she believed she could “make a difference.” Her motives may seem cliché, but she is neither insincere nor naive. In her very first year as a new “lateral-entry” teacher, having changed careers in midlife to become a teacher, Drye must struggle hard to stave off despair in the face of what she believes are counterproductive (and even harmful) but increasingly widespread state tests and curriculum guidelines. She doesn’t lose sight of the place of her classroom in the sprawling bureaucracy of public education and the obstacles her students face as they themselves struggle to make their way through a seemingly irrelevant curriculum. She has no illusions about what she, individually, can do in such a system. Yet she refuses to believe that the curriculum alone defines her relevance to her students. For Drye,

the importance of what English teachers offer students like hers cannot be manifested in test preparation; rather, she defines the relevance of what she does in terms of its effect on the ways in which her students make sense of their lives and the complex and often confusing world they are entering.

In the midst of the controversies within English studies that I described above, I have sensed a desire to reclaim the idealism and hope that kept Drye in the classroom for a second year. In discussions at gatherings like NCTE's annual convention, CCCC, and smaller conferences, I have heard versions of Drye's vision along with her frustration and anger and skepticism. In recent publications, like Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald's *Reason to Believe* (1998), I hear a desire to keep that vision at the center of what we do even as we struggle to understand ourselves in a time of change and even as we battle among ourselves to define our mission while confronting uncertain prospects for the future. Perhaps it is a response to the turn of the millennium, a collective need to step back and try to make sense of where we are. Or perhaps it is a refusal to let go of a hopeful vision that seems to run through the short history of the teaching of English. In part, we English teachers function through myths that we both inherit and help perpetuate, myths about possibilities for individuals and for communities. Kathleen Yancey draws on those myths as she shares her own vision—a hopeful though complex one—for English studies. Like many of the other contributors to this volume, Yancey defines relevance ultimately in terms of the effect we can have on our students' lives. But she recognizes that that effect cannot be separated neatly from the cultural contexts within which we work or from the battles we fight with each other about what we do. Some readers will resist her calls for a kind of professional pluralism, drawing perhaps on recent critiques of pluralism as hegemonic and ineffective in eradicating racism, sexism, classism, and other such ills from our society. But Yancey understands that the pluralism that has characterized American society is inextricably wrapped up in identity formation, in our conceptions of who we are as individuals and as members of many communities at once. That isn't likely to change, Yancey tells us, and that's not a bad thing, since there is a kind of strength in our diversity that can open up opportunities to reveal

and examine and combat the kinds of problems that inevitably arise in a pluralistic culture—the kinds of problems that Villanueva describes in his chapter and Finders in hers. Yancey is no dreamer, but she sees that we cannot do this difficult work without a dream. And she's willing to admit that our collective and uncertain vision of what we do, problematic though it may be, is and perhaps *must be* an idealistic one.

That conflict will attend any efforts to realize such a vision is self-evident, and even as most of the writers in this volume share fundamental assumptions about teaching English, they often diverge in the way they understand specific issues and in their prescriptions for how to proceed from here. The Exchange sections that end each of the three main sections of this book represent an attempt to acknowledge this inevitable conflict and to suggest that the arguments and visions presented here are not so neat and finished as they tend to seem in a published volume. They are in flux and are sometimes tentative and uncertain, and the authors here continue to refine, rethink, challenge, and even change them. The Exchange texts are not intended to present all the possible objections or critiques of the chapters in each section of the book (nor even the main objections or critiques); rather, their purpose is to raise some productive questions and to extend the ideas presented in the chapters. And they are meant to remind us that our attempt to define the relevance of what we do as English teachers—to answer questions about the *point* of English studies—is unfinished and ongoing.

It is important to note here in conclusion that this volume was never intended to present a comprehensive vision for English studies, nor was it compiled as a kind of point/counterpoint statement encompassing the dominant competing visions of English at this seemingly critical time in the discipline's history. Rather, it was an effort to answer the question of the relevance of our work as English teachers by listening to the voices of various people who offer their own visions, experiences, perspectives, hopes, and doubts. Some of those voices will be recognizable to readers who follow scholarly and professional discussions about such matters. Others are voices that readers have never before heard in such discussions—voices of committed classroom teachers who

struggle with the question of their relevance every day. Scott Leonard and I considered it crucial to include those voices in this volume, no matter how variegated the volume would therefore become. We believe the sometimes uneven and unfinished “feel” of this volume is entirely appropriate to the subject we have addressed in it, and we hope readers will find in that quality of the book provocative reasons to think in new and useful ways about the relevance of English teaching.

Works Cited

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