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## ABSTRACT

This 17th annual report presents information on current trends and issues informally discussed by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions. Commission on Composition (Richard Gebhardt, director) discussed the role of writing in literacy; interactions of race, class, language, and learning; teaching grammar; large-scale writing assessment; computers and writing instruction; limited preparation to teach writing; excessive teacher workload; writing across the curriculum; and dual-credit courses. The Commission on Curriculum (Frankey Jones, director) discussed public discussion of curriculum; high-stakes assessment; mandating of curriculum by legislative bodies; and use of nonfiction literature throughout the curriculum. The Commission on Language (Judith Wells Lindfors, director) discussed: teachers and students determining when to take standardized tests; trends mandating specific teaching methodology; teaching grammar; and classroom climates in which language that demonizes or belittles groups of students is not used. The Commission on Literature (Michael Moore, director) discussed multicultural literature; NCTE Booklist; the growing influence of the English Advanced Placement exam; the need for assessing the impact of writing and literature projects. The Commission on Media (Andrew Garrison, director) discussed increasing recognition of the importance of media education; insufficient or unavailable training for classroom and preservice teachers; mass media role; increasing numbers of resources for teachers of media literacy; distance learning; intellectual property; The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's coalition of educators used in the production of American novel adaptations; and the concern over commercial, private corporations offering hardware and programming to schools in exchange for students watching commercials. The Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire, director) discussed their support for the four resolutions passed at the NCTE annual conference in Denver, Colorado. (RS)

# Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 2000

## Six Summaries

Complied by Dale Allender

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# *Trends and Issues in English Instruction, 2000—Six Summaries*

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## **Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English**

Compiled by Dale Allender, NCTE

**D**uring their meetings at the November 1999 Annual Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas here do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the 17th annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

### **COMMISSION ON COMPOSITION (Richard Gebhardt, Director)**

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1. *The Role of Writing in Literacy* (Continuing Trend). For the third consecutive year, members of the Commission on Composition are concerned about the limited emphasis on writing in public and academic discussions about literacy, a trend that could reduce the quality of instruction and undermine NCTE's commitment to integrated language arts.
2. *Interactions of Race, Class, Language, and Learning* (Continuing Trend). Again this year, there were significant Commission concerns about the complex interactions of race, class, and language and their impacts on learning and on the way learners are treated, evaluated, and categorized. Difference should not be seen as deficiency; native language resources should be recognized as strengths; and "literacy" should not be equated with literacy in English. Assessment of the English literacy of students is an essential and proper concern for public education in the United States, but such assessment should not be conducted to the exclusion of assessments of literacy in other languages.
3. *Teaching "Grammar"* (Continuing Trend). "Grammar" instruction continues to be an issue for teachers whose efforts to teach it in the context of writing clash with public expectations of direct work with grammar, usage, and standard English. This persistent issue—of particular consequence for students studying English as a second language—is exacerbated by several other current trends. First, heavy teaching loads may encourage teachers to use grammar drill rather than extensive writ-

ing. Second, those with limited preparation to teach writing may use out-of-context grammar instruction more readily than those familiar with research about the ineffectiveness of the approach. Third, the place of usage and grammar in the rubrics of many writing assessment instruments raises expectations of parents, policymakers, and some teachers that schools should teach grammar and standard usage directly.

4. *Large-Scale Writing Assessment* (Continuing Trend). One of the Commission's major concerns is the negative impact of assessment on curriculum and teaching in the language arts. Often, the curriculum is distorted as emphasis in some areas is reduced to allow increased instruction in grammar. And the attention and energy of students and teachers are being diverted to test preparation of all kinds. In some cases, assignments that encourage students to use writing for significant ends of learning and communication are being replaced by formulaic writing of artificial essay forms called for in writing assessments. Given such erosion in curriculum and teaching time, members of the Commission wonder whether large-scale assessment programs are driven as much by the educational goal of literacy as they are by political and financial motivations.
5. *Computers and Writing Instruction* (Continuing Trend). As in each of the past four years, Commission members were concerned about the impact of computers on teaching, including such issues as the quality of software available to support writing instruction, the lack of training of teachers to utilize computers in writing instruction, the pace with which research resources are being shifted to computers, and the widely varying access students and teachers have to computers of sufficient capacity to utilize library and Internet resources.
6. *Limited Preparation to Teach Writing* (Continuing Trend). Again this year, the linked matters of the preparation and workload of teachers of writing concerned Commission members. The Commission discussed the limited training to teach writing typical in teacher-preparation programs, particularly of elementary school teachers, and in professional-development programs for inservice teachers. This limitation exacerbates problems involved in assessment by leaving teachers less well-prepared than they could be to adjust instruction to accommodate demands of large-scale assessment programs. Members of the Commission urge continuing attention to the need for professional standards in the teaching of writing, for substantial writing components in teacher-preparation programs, and for effective staff development at all grade levels.

7. *Excessive Teacher Workload* (Continuing Trend). The typical workload of public school teachers (class size, numbers of sections and preparations, lack of planning time, etc.) undermines effective teaching of writing. Excessive workload exacerbates various problems of writing assessment by leaving teachers less time and energy with which to adjust instruction and accommodate demands of large-scale assessment programs. Members of the Commission urge NCTE to continue its efforts to advocate effective professional workloads for teachers at all levels.
8. *Writing Across the Curriculum* (Continuing Trend). Interest continues in writing across the curriculum (WAC), but so do problems and inefficiencies of WAC teaching. One of the most persistent of these problems is the perceived competition of writing with the subject-matter content of courses. An emerging negative trend associated with WAC may be a devaluing of the professional credentials of language arts faculty well-trained in writing by those who take WAC to mean that "anyone can teach writing." On the other hand, writing components are appearing in some assessments of math, social sciences, and sciences. The presence of such essay components in subject-matter assessment may strengthen WAC by motivating subject-matter teachers to emphasize writing in their classes, to participate in WAC activities in their schools, and to seek ideas from language arts faculty well-trained in writing.
9. *Dual-Credit Courses* (Emerging Trend). The worthy goal of closer cooperation between schools and colleges is encouraging dual-credit courses and other means by which capable students can earn college credit for appropriate high school work. The approach can be very beneficial, especially for students able to complete college more efficiently and economically. However, the approach could, in some cases, result in courses that do not meet the curricular goals or student needs of a college or school.

## COMMISSION ON CURRICULUM

(Frankey Jones, Director)

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1. The Commission on Curriculum calls for the entire educational community to make public its discussion of curriculum. We are concerned about the substitution of standards documents and commercially published scope and sequence charts in place of a well-crafted curriculum framework.

Teachers must be meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect their professional lives in classrooms, school districts, and universities. Educational institutions must provide time, resources, and incentives in support of those efforts. Professional development, like all school learning, must be sustained, dynamic, and regenerative. Revision is not only for writing; it is also for teaching.

2. The Commission strongly opposes the mandating of high-stakes assessment. We believe an overreliance on testing exacts from our students an emotional toll and

consumes an inordinate amount of classroom time and staggering sums of money. Assessment tools should reflect, not dictate, curriculum. We deplore the continuing abuse of assessment as a tool to sort, label, and rank students, teachers, and schools.

3. Further, the Commission strongly opposes the mandating of curriculum, methods, and assessment by legislative bodies. Such mandates conflict directly with what decades of experience and research have demonstrated about best practice in the teaching of language and literature and with the democratic principles these elected officials are charged with defending.

The Commission believes that language and curriculum are developing critical perspectives. Teaching and learning are political activities; the politics of curriculum, therefore, should be raised to a more conscious level. We support schools, colleges, and universities that demonstrate ongoing awareness of the need to transform their curriculum in ways that embrace advocacy for social justice in the community.

4. While the Commission endorses the growing use of non-fiction literature throughout the curriculum, we continue to be concerned with the pressure to devalue literature's role in the classroom. If allowed to become a handmaiden to other areas, or little more than source material with which to teach isolated skills, facts, or literary terminology, literature will lose its own integrity, and students will be denied the rich aesthetic experiences literature provides.

We encourage accrediting high schools, colleges, and agencies to view education from a curricular perspective with a unifying framework, rather than as a list of individual requirements to be met. The Commission believes curriculum is more than a grab bag of isolated activities. We applaud English language arts curriculum that meaningfully integrates fine arts, media, and technology, not as tacked-on activities but as tools for thinking and communicating.

The Commission believes that every student deserves a quality education, and we continue to be deeply concerned that budget cuts restrict development and implementation of informed curriculum. Curriculum should reflect high expectations for all students. Educators must avoid programs of study and standards that privilege one group of students over another. We worry about the inappropriate imposition of corporate values, processes, and models on education and condemn the manipulation of curriculum by groups promoting their own economic or ideological interests.

## COMMISSION ON LANGUAGE

(Judith Wells Lindfors, Director)

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1. The research has determined that it takes five to seven years to gain the academic language necessary for school success. English language learners should have the right to develop their oral and written language. Teachers should have the professional autonomy to determine

when students are ready to take standardized tests as opposed to this being arbitrarily determined by school districts and/or legislative mandates.

2. We oppose legal mandates that impose phonics instruction (e.g., in California); require that phonics be taught in teacher-education programs; require IEPs for Special Education students; and prohibit the use of dialogue journals in classrooms.
3. The reaction to the skill-and-drill period of the 1950s eliminated grammar instruction in many areas. A renewed interest in grammar teaching exists in the absence of detailed discussion of the purposes of such instruction and of modern conceptions of English structure, the pendulum too often swings right back to "error-correction" drill approaches. What is needed is an articulated notion of grammar as a part of language structure awareness.
4. Language that belittles or demonizes groups of students both creates and perpetuates a school (and community) climate in which those students are belittled and demonized. Use of such language by teachers is completely unprofessional. Teachers should be encouraged to develop and assist in developing methodologies to create classroom climates in which students are made aware that such language is not part of the school environment.

## COMMISSION ON LITERATURE

(Michael Moore, Director)

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1. Multicultural literature (MCL) is a trend noted by this Commission over many years. This issue was visited again by the 1999 Commission with continuing and additional concerns. When MCL is discussed, it is usually about selection and appropriateness for readers. However, a larger concern is whether or not teachers are dealing with multicultural issues when they teach. Is there a tendency to teach MCL using time-honored strategies that reduce the literature to a series of reading routines without dealing with the multicultural issues and themes? How careful are we with our language when teaching the literature of other cultures? Teaching MCL has the power to transform each of us by making us sensitive to language and issues, yet to what extent is this a valued outcome by our schools and our society? Have we won the MCL wars or are we doing the same thing with MCL that we have done with traditional texts without exploring cultural issues, and have we reduced MCL to the same routines we use with all literature? Is MCL starting to be seen as the literature of victimization? Finally, when reading MCL, we must be aware of both our literal and cultural assumptions.
2. The notion of an NCTE Booklist has been discussed widely by this Commission. The current proposal by the task force appointed by Sheridan Blau has suggested a national book club with three or four books selected each

year. The Literature Commission backed the proposal unanimously. It should be noted that the Literature Commission has been behind the discussion of such a club for quite some time and has offered sessions sponsored by the Commission at past conferences.

3. We question the growing influence of the English AP examination and its effect on the high school English curriculum. We have noted at least one state, South Carolina, using the exam for its own accountability and having all of its students take the exam. Additionally, what inroads has MCL made in the English curriculum? Is high school literature instruction affected by college reading lists? We feel that close, critical reading is at the heart of literature teaching and that schools and teachers should feel free to choose what literature will enable her/his learners best.
4. Finally, writing and literature projects have been around for decades. To what extent have these projects impacted instruction? We feel it is time to assess the impact of these various practices and determine their effectiveness. Our fear is that, in spite of knowing better, many in our profession feel powerless to teach any way other than the traditional way in which they themselves were taught.

## COMMISSION ON MEDIA

(Andrew Garrison, Director)

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1. The Commission on Media noted, with pleasure, the increasing recognition of the importance of media education as a part of the curriculum by educators, educational publications, and the mainstream press. Media literacy was represented in articles in the publications of Center on English Learning and Achievement and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, as well as in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine. Many teachers, supervisors, and curriculum developers are striving to find appropriate ways to address the impact of the media as well as incorporate media as a pedagogical tool. Several states (Minnesota has been a leader here) have published educational standards for language arts that prominently include media literacy, and educational goals that include "Viewing and Representing." Texas is currently leading other states in their media education standards by including Viewing, Representing, and "Producing."
2. Insufficient or unavailable training for classroom and preservice teachers, combined with increasing pressure to perform to standards, can create a backlash among teachers: instead of showing the way that media literacy can help them achieve their classroom goals, media education may be perceived as another burden thrust upon them. The Commission sees the need to encourage teachers with experience in media education to share their experiences with each other. The Commission also recognizes the need for more formal professional development for inservice teachers and the development of media literacy curriculum at colleges of education.

3. The renewed public interest in media education was, in part, a reaction to the pain of the news of school shootings and bombings. The Commission noted that mass media have been singled out as an easy target in simplistic attempts to address complex social problems. The media are filters for events and cultural artifacts as well as artifacts themselves in the cultural landscape. Instead of merely blaming television and movies for the problem of violence in schools, we encourage the analysis, interpretation, and production of media to understand how they are used and to use them more effectively.

An overall sense prevailed that the use of media in all of our lives is increasing at such a rate that the imperative to recognize and teach media education is greater than ever. Our students need to understand that media are made by people who have intent (i.e., media are constructs and they have explicit and implicit social and economic values). Educators need to be able to share their students' enjoyment of media and popular culture while also helping them to recognize and actively explore the special discourses in which specific media engage. For example, what is the discourse in hip-hop style fashion sold in a major chain store? What are the discourses on war, on American foreign policy, on human interactions, on the role of American journalism in a movie such as *Three Kings*?

4. Resources for individual teachers do exist, and they are becoming more accessible and organized. The Commission applauds NCTE for bringing in new manuscripts for publication in the area of media literacy and the continuing work of the Assembly on Media Arts. We hope to see more. Likewise other books, periodicals, and Web sites are devoted to the topic. The Commission noted that one of the most comprehensive lists of resources is available at <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/FA/homegateb.html>. the Media Literacy Online Project of the University of Oregon's College of Education.
5. Distance learning and the incorporation of Web-based activities in language arts classrooms are growing trends. Several Commission members raised concerns about how content is changed by the manner in which it is transferred. Some practices appropriate to a classroom with a teacher face-to-face with students do not carry over into Web and narrowcast television lessons.
6. The Commission noted growing questions regarding intellectual property. As pointed out in previous Trends and Issues statements, intellectual property rights are much more complicated by the publication and access of articles, audio, and visual material and the Internet. What should be available free for educational purposes in some sort of "fair use" category? What happens when students incorporate Web-derived material into their own work? Who is responsible for licensing and what kind of fees should exist?

A related issue is that of the use of copyrighted software in classrooms across districts and states. With budgets already straining, some schools and teachers are using software for individuals in multiple-user situations,

in violation of licensing agreements. As a way to address the problems of budget and use, Ohio has developed a consortium for group-purchase of software. This may be a model for other states.

7. The Commission applauded the way in which the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has built a coalition of educators, including representatives from NCTE to work with them in the production of their series of American novel adaptations, *The American Collection*. CPB has also produced educational material for classroom teachers available on the Web. We applaud this marriage of literature, film, and Internet, but as one of our commission members who worked closely with the project noted, the material, at that time, did not address media literacy issues directly. The Web-published curriculum missed an opportunity to explore the media as well as the literature.
8. The Commission reiterated its concern about commercial, private corporations offering television monitors, news programming, computer hardware, and Internet access in return for contractual agreements to have students watch commercial messages. The concern is both with how commercial values shape the content of offered programs and dismay at turning the classroom into a marketplace with a captive audience. As noted in last year's statement, ". . . economic factors often lead underfunded school districts to turn to business interests to obtain equipment and services." The disparity continues to grow between well-funded schools with classroom access to the latest computers, television technology, and relevant software, and those schools making do with outdated or insufficient materials.

## COMMISSION ON READING (Mary H. Maguire, Director)

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The Commission on Reading applauds and strongly supports the four NCTE Resolutions passed at the Annual Conference in Denver.

We reaffirm our commitment to the professional development of teachers and our support to those who are forced to teach under repressive curricular mandates. The Reading Commission strongly believes that "quick fixes" to perceived reading, literacy, or school problems—such as teaching more phonics, returning to the basics, creating more testing, or even creating charter schools—won't meet the needs of the diverse populations in our schools.



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