



Annual NEATE Conference, 2016

The theme of the conference was **Celebrating Authentic Teaching and Learning** and it took place on October 21-22. We were grateful to welcome two speakers, **Rhina P. Espailat** and **Penny Kittle**.

2016 NEATE Conference Speakers

Friday's luncheon speaker, **Rhina P. Espailat**, a Dominican American poet and translator, spoke about her experiences as a bilingual student and the teachers in PS94 who offered her the option to draw her words instead of always speaking her words aloud, which Rhina deeply appreciated. Rhina also spoke passionately about her love of poetry and said, "Poetry is something people do when they're trying not to scream." She also said that poetry is universal and allows you to hear from the past and speak to the future. Rhina has published thirteen books, comprising collections of poetry, essays, short stories and translations. See an excerpt of Rhina's keynote and insights on pages 6-7 of the newsletter.



Saturday's speaker was **Penny Kittle**, a K-12 literacy coach who directs new teacher mentoring for the North Conway, New Hampshire School District. Penny has made many contributions to English teaching and the life of thousands of teachers and teenagers. In her keynote, she reminded us about how many assigned books our students don't read and the importance of reading A LOT, which she documented with research and evidence. Penny spoke about her approach to reading, which goes well beyond the traditional approach of sustained silent reading. It's clear how willing and even insistent she is about working with the most hard-core non-readers and offering them a path to enjoy reading, even for middle and high school students. Penny's presentation offered a sense of renewal and hope about the art of teaching

reading. Check out Penny's books, including: *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*.

The conference also included 23 concurrent sessions including: *Planning, Implementing, and Assessing Classroom Discussions, Literacy Strategies that Deepen Understanding and Enhance Inquiry, and How Do We Cultivate Social Learning within a Vital Learning Community?*

Annie O'Shaughnessy presenting: *How Do We Cultivate Social Learning within a Vital Learning Community?*



NEATE Award Winners



Award winner Mary Elizabeth Fulco receiving her award from NEATE President, Kim Parker

2016 Ann Garland West Award Winner

The Ann Garland West award was presented to Mary Elizabeth Fulco of Staples High School in Connecticut.

Mary Elizabeth touches all types of students in her day, from her freshmen who struggle with reading and writing, to her AP Language and Composition juniors who have maintained 100% passing record on the standardized test. To help her students succeed, she works collaboratively with other teachers as well as counselors to develop strategies for their academic success as well as their mental health. As one colleague writes, "To be in Mary's classroom is to feel cared about as a student and human being."

She is the winner of the 2017 Westport Teacher of the Year. Other accolades include the 2016 Dateline Club Educator of the Year, 2016 Folgers Teaching Fellow and four-time Columbia Gold Start Crowd award winner.

According to Mary Elizabeth, "Teaching is hard. There are many stresses and demands that can wear a teacher down. However, great teachers maintain a sense of optimism about the world and for the students that surround them. Teachers are driven by the need to make meaningful connections with students and colleagues, and to share in the journey of self-improvement. Teachers are inspirational, creative, collaborative, and dedicated, and ask for little more than small acknowledgements, simple praise, and genuine appreciation."

2016 Marian Gleason Award

"Her passion drove the class. And her excitement bounced to all of us every day!" These are the words one of her students used to describe Samantha Briggs of Tantasqua Regional High School in Massachusetts, this



Award winner, Samantha Biggs

year's recipient of the Marian Gleason Most Promising New Teacher Award. In fact, the most common word that her colleagues and students use to describe Samantha is "passionate." She began her career in the challenging position of a long-term substitute where she quickly learned how to adapt to what her students needed. She continues to work hard developing lessons to meet all their needs. Her enthusiasm for teaching is infectious. In her nomination letter, her mentor stated, "Daily, she seems truly honored and thrilled to be an educator. Her lesson plans are innovative and fresh...she often makes the literature come alive in creative ways that always require active involvement from her students. She is inspiring."

Samantha is also generous with her time and knowledge when collaborating with her colleagues during department meetings and professional development workshops. She is a Teacher Consultant for the Western Mass Writing Project and is a member of NCTE and NEATE.

2016 Poet of the Year Award

This was the 37th year of the NEATE poetry competition and this year's Poet of the Year Award went to Vicky Norlund. Vicky is the department head of English at Rockville High School in Vernon, CT where she has been teaching for twenty-six years. In addition, Vicky has developed the creative writing program at RHS and teaches the English methods course for the University of Connecticut's TRPCG department. Many of her students have won prestigious national and state poetry and prose competitions. Her poetry has been published in the Connecticut English Journal and The Leaflet.



Award winner, Vicky Norlund reading her poetry

2016 Mini-Grant Winners

Thanks to a very successful raffle at this year's annual Fall Conference, NEATE is awarding two mini-grants in the amount of \$200 each. The grant is intended to assist NEATE members in pursuing academic work or creative projects related to professional development or effective classroom instruction.

Lori L'Heureux who teaches English grades ten to 12 in the Woonsocket Area Career and Technical School in Rhode Island will use her grant to organize an author meet and greet luncheon presentation for her senior class. The grant will be used to purchase books that will be personally autographed by the author after a presentation and question and answer session and for the food that the Culinary Arts students will prepare and serve.

The second grant was awarded to Linda Sasso from Wachusett Regional High School in Holden, MA. She plans to cultivate and enhance the reading skills of struggling readers in her lowest level classes in a Book Club project. Funds will be used to purchase books at the appropriate reading level that will be of high interest to her students who will be required to formally assess the works as well as complete surveys.

Mini-grants are awarded each year at the Conference where attendees apply in person. The raffles, which support the grants, have been coordinated by NEATE member Dick West who is sure to gather a wide variety of prizes.

“You Can Lead a Person to Kindness” by Lynn Leschke, NEATE President

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome my NEATE colleagues into this new and exciting year with one of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems:

IF I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

I've been thinking a lot about kindness lately, the need for it in the classroom and maybe even more importantly outside of my classroom. When I think about what I love about teaching, I think of the “ah-ha” moments we've all had when we see the light come into a student's eyes the moment they come to a conclusion we are looking for, or the joy in their faces when we convince them that Othello may very well be the greatest thing they've ever read. When I think of the greatest moments in my teaching career, the

ones that make me miss my classroom even in mid August while I'm reading poetry on Long Sands Beach, they all involve the kindness I have witnessed between students. My classes often involve students working in groups sharing ideas on a piece of literature, working out the meaningful quotes in a text and giving feedback on each other's writing. On countless occasions I've been stopped in my tracks at the kindness and support they show each other. Not only do I hear good advice being given to help classmates perform better on tests and quizzes or writing assignments, but I also overhear empathetic counseling on personal issues, sensitive comforting after a bad grade, encouragement to athletes before the big game, and supportive consolation for the rejection letter that just came from their first choice college. Being a positive person is hard sometimes especially in the world we live in today, and yet they seem to do it so well.

We've all heard the call to do random acts of kindness, right? It seems like a good suggestion – who could find fault in that? But the word random in that phrase always sits wrong with me – arbitrary, accidental, done without conscious decision. I wonder, is that what we really want? I know that the people who use this expression have the very best intentions at heart. Kindness, random or otherwise, is nothing to find fault in. My hope is that we don't deliver our acts of kindness randomly but rather strive to make them the norm, the conscious, the intentional parts of our lives.

Many students do acts of kindness for their community through school clubs, church groups and even private family organizations. A few of the most remarkable clubs I would recommend getting your students involved in are The Be Like Brit Foundation (<https://belikebrit.org/>), the 365z Foundation (<http://www.365z.org/>), and Rachel's Challenge (<http://rachelchallenge.org/>). The students in these clubs help the community by focusing on spreading positivity.

Still, it's the smaller acts of kindness that I see everyday that keep me going: the smile for a friend in the hallway, helping a classmate study in the library, genuinely listening when someone is talking, and stopping negative conversation, gossip or insults. One of my favorite lines to include in a college recommendation is she/he "is one of the kindest students I've had in class" and I've been writing that a lot lately. I feel blessed to have chosen a profession that allows me to be exposed to so many beautiful examples of compassion.

Two of my colleagues passed away a little more than a year ago. The first woman, Maribeth Worthy, was a teacher for whom students waited in line to see at the end of the day. Though some were looking for help or clarification on the latest assignment, many just wanted a little extra positive energy to get through to the next day. The second was Betty Fauteaux, a woman I was lucky enough to have as a British Lit. teacher when I was in high school myself and even luckier to have as an early mentor when I first started teaching. Both women touched so many lives not only with their fine teaching, but also with the kindness and support they showed to others – including me. They most definitely stopped more than one heart from breaking and put several fainting robins back into their nests, as Dickinson would have wished. Certainly, they did not live in vain. Going it alone gets tough but with the help and kindness of others it's so much easier. That's what these women have taught me.

That's what being part of the NEATE community has taught me as well; that's what I hope we can all pass on to our students. We know that they are watching and they *will* follow our lead. When they see someone like their teachers showing kindness, it will give them permission to do the same.

And so I'll share excerpts of one more poem with you. It's called "The Low Road" by Marge Piercy.

Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, ..., hope, ...

Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no

seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.

A thousand have solidarity and your own
newsletter,
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
It starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

What if each day we could add one more
person to whom we show kindness; just
think of what we could be, what we could
do, and where we could go. Thanks to all
of you for your deliberate, planned, and
purposeful acts of kindness. Having had
the chance to interact with so many great
teachers of NEATE – I see great days
ahead!



Independent Reading in the Language-Based Learning Disability Classroom

by Brenda LeBlanc,
Special Education,
Somerville High School

As a teacher in the Special Education department, I work with students for which accessing literacy strategies in the general education classroom is not an option. All of my students read significantly below grade level and struggle with spelling, reading comprehension, reading fluency and decoding.. Students require excessive scaffolding, pre-teaching, re-teaching, and explicit instruction at every juncture. Telling students to simply “read the directions” can be met with ambivalence, frustration, and anger. But why does this have to diminish the joy of reading a great book? Why can’t students of all reading levels dig into a text at an entry point comfortable to their skill and make meaning from it? Why can’t students collaborate in book talks and share their insights with others? This year, I set a goal for my classrooms: to provide and encourage relevant, authentic

opportunities to access reading, for which students can make their own meaning that connects to their own lives and their greater worlds.

Books arrive once a week; from my own library, book sales, publisher’s copies, and the occasional crisp new book I can’t help but contribute. Spread over a few desks, the hunt begins. With each new bag of books, is a new student interested in exploring the cover art, in asking questions about the characters or genre, and investigating words on the page.

Penny Kittle has me convinced. “It feels radical to suggest we look at individual students instead of groups in a time with the Common Core Initiative is driving thinking in education, but a reading appetite is quirky, singular and essential. At the core of what I know about students, teaching, and learning is passionate engagement. Passions are peculiar, but passions drive readers to devour books” (Kittle 65). This year, my reading goal for all of my students is the same: find joy in reading and

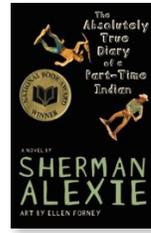
increase our reading stamina outside of the classroom. Students can and will earn the capacity to find joy in reading. I do my best to collect a range of high interest texts that students can access independently through print or audiobook and increase their reading stamina reading in both time and text complexity.

Some students are still choosing books that are beyond their ability, others are struggling to find a peaceful setting to read. But, reading logs are rolling, books are passed from one hand to another, comparisons between characters are celebrated!

An Excerpt from Rhina P. Espailat's Keynote

A "Gotcha" question that was popular when I was studying to be a teacher went like this: "What are you going to teach?" The assumption was that you would give one of two answers: your subject, or the students you were preparing to teach eventually. Then the "Gotcha" answer was the other, the one you did not give, implying that you had a partial view of your future profession. The asker would counter with "Oh, you're going to teach French? I thought you were going to teach children!" Or, conversely, "You're going to teach junior high students? But what are you going to help them learn? I thought that's what you were going to teach!" It was, of course, a false dichotomy: an apparent option created by the grammatical distinction between the direct and indirect object. A silly question, since authentic teaching always involves teaching something (direct object) to someone (indirect object).

But the question was not entirely silly: it was meant to remind us, as future teachers, of the importance of both objects. We were being told to have faces on both sides of our heads, like Janus, Roman god of entrances and exits, beginnings and endings: one face toward the living students, and the other face toward the whiteboard (known as a blackboard in my day!), where the notes are that represent some preserved content from the past, what we love and mean to pass on to the future, because we consider it somehow essential to the lives of our students. What I mean by "authentic teaching" is, in fact, that Janus look.



My copy of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has a lengthy wait list. Ninth grade students have asked to share titles with eighth graders – a website is in the works. Just recently, a history teacher mentioned to me that a student we share is having increased success in her class and, "...his independent reading is really helping his focus and stamina." The *Book Love* is growing in room 309.

I became a teacher out of gratitude and admiration for my teachers in NYC public schools, who for the most part had that Janus look, as was obvious to me because of their a) human focus on refugee children in 1939 and 1940s; b) frank passion for their subject; c) imagination, ingenuity and playfulness at the art of uniting those. [Examples: Miss Conroy and the Thanksgiving mural; Mrs. Landau and division.]

The reason for teaching math and history is clear: we need to know about the past of the place we live in, its people and its laws; and dealing with numbers is a daily practical need. But why teach poetry? Nobody needs it to succeed economically or to become a big name in this culture. Why perpetuate something that is, in practical terms, useless, simply because it seems to be universal and has endured so long in every culture we know of? What is poetry good for?

I became a poet at the age of 4, because, with a poet grandmother, I was exposed to it early and understood that it was a game, a form of adult play with mysteries in it, a strange vocabulary and odd rules, but fun. It could mesh with other games grown-ups played: music, painting, dance, sculpture, storytelling, drama—in short, all the arts, which I could see were the games people invented and played when they got to be too old for dolls and other familiar children's games. They all had limitations and boundaries, but they were not duties, like work, or means to any ends but

themselves, or obligations, like religious rules. So much for my definition of poetry as I knew it in Spanish.

Then came 1939, and everything changed for my family and me: place, circumstances, life, people, and language. Thanks to my teachers, I learned that the game of poetry could be played in English too, and apparently in every language, including those spoken by my refugee classmates from every corner of the world. Missing my lost family, as many of them missed theirs, I discovered the current of shared meaning under the music, the pain under the play, and the fact that poetry, when it sang, very often sang because the author was trying very hard not to scream. My teachers by and large did not tell me what to find in the poems we read, but only where to look, and what to make of repetition and pattern, word play and all of the musical elements that I once thought were pure play, when I heard them in Spanish, and danced and clapped to them.

When they encouraged me to write poetry of my own, they didn't tell me what to write, or what to write about, but only how other people had done it before, and how I could either follow the ways they had laid out, or move away from those by coming up with changes of my own. They taught me the game in English that I remembered playing and loving in Spanish, but this time with some human voice under the music saying its own what. And they trusted me to find my own what.

As teachers, we can't provide the what—the content—of any student's poem, nor do we need to: reality provides that, whether we—or they—like it or not, all the way through life. It's how they respond to the "prompts," the assignments that circumstances present them with, that will determine what our students write.

What we, as teachers, can provide is the how, the verbal toolbox of the writer in all its bewildering richness, as we've inherited it from centuries of poets: meter, whether intricate, elaborate or conversational; the various forms of rhyme, alliteration, echoes and other types of sound play; imagery; the countless figures of speech that work on what we mean the way chisels and hammers and planes work on the medium at hand. We can teach them to work on language with those tools, as my sculptor husband—an industrial arts teacher in NYC schools—used to teach his students to work on wood, clay or metal with the tools appropriate for those materials. We can teach our students those as the pieces in a game, for the fun of it, through the reading of successful poems with lots of visceral and sensory appeal. We can assign them exercises in the use of those tools, with the understanding that the results will be experiments, not to be kept or graded or held up to scrutiny for profound meanings, or expected to achieve anything in the world at all. Those exercises won't be real poems; when—if—real poems show up, they'll announce themselves and be recognized, complete with flaws that will need revision, which is also part of the game, and of the fun.



2017 NEATE
CONFERENCE:
OCTOBER 20-21 AT THE
HOLIDAY INN IN
MANSFIELD, MA

To submit news and other items to the newsletter, please email: buffy8671@gmail.com

