

Leila Christenbury • Ken Lindblom

FOURTH EDITION



MAKING THE JOURNEY

Being and Becoming
a Teacher of English
Language Arts

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*to Paul and Leila,
my first teachers*

—LC

to Patty

—KL

IF IT IS DARK
WHEN THIS IS GIVEN TO YOU,
HAVE CARE FOR ITS CONTENT
WHEN THE MOON SHINES.

—Robert Creeley,
"A Form of Women" (*For Love*)



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1 | THE TEACHER, THE STUDENT, THE SCHOOL

When we listen to the stories of language learners over time, we appreciate the enormous responsibilities that fall to English teachers—the potential for what we teach and how we teach it to reverberate in relations between parents and children; to affect decisions at the levels of individual conscience and institutional power; to condition identity; or to cultivate the resources, individual and collective; to sustain tradition and adapt to change . . . While there is an overwhelming immediacy to what teachers teach and learners learn, this work leaves residues, unintended legacies that can make things easier or harder later on future teachers and future learners. In short, we operate in fraught circumstances.

—Deborah Brandt, "Foreword," *Reading the Past, Writing the Future: A Century of American Literacy Education and the National Council of Teachers of English*

Beginnings



Leila's Story: How I Became a Teacher

I never planned to be a middle school or high school English teacher. It was very much a second choice. What I really wanted to be, a college professor specializing in medieval literature, got lost in the now almost legendary English teacher glut of the 1970s and a complete lack of funds. There were few jobs, and I, who had been on scholarship, faced the inescapable fact that time is money. I had completed my

undergraduate degree in three and a half years and my master's in a record nine months; at the end of this dubious achievement I couldn't afford any more education—financially or psychologically.

So I filled out about two dozen applications, interviewed at every commutable school system, and, after this grueling job search, gratefully accepted my first job as an English teacher, grades 8 through 12, in a tiny high school.

But because teaching high school had not been in my plans, I was not prepared. I had had no student teaching and had taken no courses that gave me the slightest indication of what I was getting ready to do. I came to the high school classroom with a Phi Beta Kappa key, a bachelor's and a master's in English, an appreciation for fourteenth-century alliterative poetry and the origins of English biography—and not a clue as to how to connect what I knew to the 120 teenagers I would be teaching. Fortunately, as any teacher will tell you, students taught me. During my first semester they endured my unscorable exams, my lame directions, my changes of curriculum, my indecipherable comments on their essays, my wavering concept of discipline. Directly and indirectly, sometimes tactfully, sometimes sharply, they gave me advice about what I could do to improve over those first few months; when they found me fairly receptive, our relationship stabilized.

And, for my part, I was too overwhelmed at first to feel awfully upset about teaching “just” high school. In fact, it quickly became my guilty secret: I found my students interesting—no, that's not accurate—I found them consuming. I found myself talking a great deal about them and what they said and what I said, often to the exasperation of friends and family. My classroom blunders became fuel for thought, and I began to plot and plan each day, each period, with a new sense of adventure. I began to watch my students' reactions and body language and expressions, convinced that actually the key to what to do was right there in the class, right in front of me—if only I could clear my eyes and just see it. I was experiencing something very intense, and I was struggling to make sense of it.

And then, as in a scene from a bad movie, I had my epiphany. One wintry morning somebody in the back row—somebody whose name I no longer remember and, tellingly, from whom I do remember I hadn't expected that much—made an observation about the short story we were reading. I heard his comment. And then I really *heard* it. The comment was so original, so insightful, so full of possibilities, that I was stunned. It was the proverbial standing still of time; if it *had* been a movie, the heavens would have opened, a shaft of sunlight would have flooded the classroom, and music would have swelled. But real life is usually nothing at all like the movies. My recollection is that I halted and, for a moment at least, just froze. The comment was one that with all my knowledge and education and insight—and class preparation—I had not anticipated. Further, the observation blew the top off our—the class' and my—assumptions about that particular short story.

My next reaction was one of almost overwhelming excitement, an excitement that was infectious as the class began to discuss this wonderful possibility about this story.

Well, what about that? Is it true? Why do you think so? If that's right, what else can we assume? I was excited, exhilarated, and the students were, too. I know now that I saw that day what could happen in a class and how, if I was lucky, I could spend my life. It was a central and almost searing experience: I turned, really saw that student, that classroom, really heard that comment, and, essentially, in that class, on that day, fell in love with teaching. It was, for me, the experience that Rainer Maria Rilke describes in "Archaic Torso of Apollo" when, after viewing a powerful piece of sculpture, he is overwhelmed and realizes, simply, awfully, "You must change your life" (1962, 181). After that experience I had, actually, to change my life. And I did.

My vision of being a medievalist yielded, replaced by the reality and guts and fascination of the classroom and my students. I had found my home, almost by accident, and my blood seemed to run quicker than it ever had in the library looking up the etymology of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) or while studying alliterative devices in the fourteenth-century poem "Pearl" (Gordon 1966).

I would never recommend that anyone come into teaching as I did; it was unnecessarily hard on me and, more to the point, it was demonstrably not fair to my students for me to learn at their expense. Certainly, after my first fairly isolated semester, I began to seek—and find—other sources of help; I talked with other teachers, took courses, and began reading professional journals and books. Fellow and sister teachers gave advice and shared techniques; organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and my own state English-teaching organization published journals and held conferences. I tried to catch up as quickly as I could and become a teaching professional. It was, however, an uneven learning process, some of which had to do with the inevitable difficulty of learning to teach and a great deal of which had to do with my complete lack of professional preparation.

Hit-and-miss is a difficult and dangerous way to enter this business, and I was often highly self-conscious about my shortcomings. Even in the midst of progress, I almost aborted my teaching career after one crisis too many; and, truth be told, I have always suspected that if some of my instructional stumbling and lurching had been regularly observed by those in charge, I might have, charitably, been invited to leave.

But, as is the case in many school settings, I was largely left alone, and because I was self-conscious about my teaching, I was glad to be left alone. I hung in, made what I felt were some breathtaking mistakes, and learned some vivid and painful lessons. During my biggest crisis, when I had left the security of a small school for a larger and more challenging one and was finding the transition overwhelming, I felt I was taking my personality apart and putting it back together so that I could succeed in the classroom. It was a daunting task, and I do not encourage anyone to follow my example.

My interest in helping others become teachers is therefore part of my own experience as a far less prepared beginner than most. There is knowledge and theoretical basis in our field, and you can come into the classroom with a far more comprehensive view than I had. I also trust you will find what I found: that teaching can be a marriage of soul and mind, that the classroom can be a place of discovery, passion,

and very real joy. Although not every class is wonderful every day—for there is occasional bitterness and pain and disappointment in this business—teaching is, for me, a consuming and deeply satisfying profession. Once I emerged on the other side and realized that I was a teacher, had *become* a teacher, I realized that I had also found, in essence, my calling, my life’s work.



Ken’s Story: How I Became a Teacher

By most official measures, I was a well-trained teacher with a traditional pre-service teacher education. About halfway through my undergraduate English major, I decided that if my plans of becoming a journalist didn’t work out, I should have a backup plan. So I added a secondary education minor. I attended a very small college and all my education courses, including methods of teaching, included preservice teachers in all subjects and at all grade levels. The courses were fun, practical, and interesting, but it was student teaching that did it for me.

On the morning of day one, my cooperating teacher (better known as my C’T) explained that I would just observe for a week and then take on one course, and then another each week, until I had his full schedule. It sounded logical. At the end of the first day he said, “You know, you seem like a smart man. I’d like you to pick up my first class tomorrow morning.” I did, and it was fine, though certainly not easy and not, even in that single class, without the myriad anxieties, problems, and mistakes all new teachers make. Regardless, at the end of that class he said, “You did great. Tomorrow you take *all* my classes.” So on day three, I was teaching his entire schedule. My C’T was a really helpful mentor, and in hindsight I realized he determined quickly that just throwing me right in and letting me work my way through was actually an excellent method for me. It was not, of course, how it was “supposed to be” in my teacher training program but, for me, it worked. Like Leila, I made a lot of mistakes. I also got very little sleep, and I put on quite a bit of weight (I eat when I’m anxious—or excited or relaxed). But I loved it.

In a school district on the East End of Long Island populated with the super-rich, the service workers who attended to them, and lots of people in between, I student taught a range of students from what was then called “vocational” level to “school” level to “Regents” level (aka “college-bound”). I found them equally funny, challenging, unnerving, fascinating, frustrating, and rewarding. I was hooked, and journalism was reduced to a hobby—though it did help me get my first teaching job, which included advising the school newspaper. One of my favorite classes was when I taught a lesson on being a critical consumer with the senior vocational English class. I have a very silly sense of humor (sometimes to my colleagues’ chagrin), and I decided we would use purchasing vacuums as our topic because it would allow me to tell this

joke: “What does a good vacuum do? It sucks!” Silly as it was, the students got a kick out of it. They were so good that most of them refused to say it themselves, and they turned red when I said it. But the silly joke was also a great way to establish community with this well-intended but significantly challenged group of students nervous about a new teacher (who was secretly more nervous than they were).

I also remember a very difficult and scary situation a few weeks later in another class. The only two students who failed a speech assignment were also the only two African American students in my Regents-level English class. One of their fathers, a local minister, called my CT to find out if my grading was discriminatory, or to put a finer point on it, racist. To his credit, my CT put me right on the phone with the parent and helped me respectfully and clearly explain my position. With the CT’s help, this appropriately concerned father politely accepted my explanation, and things went smoothly from there. I also learned a valuable lesson about always making sure grading is fair, accurate, and explainable. And I learned to treat parents with respect and consideration, rather than fear and defensiveness.

In my school-level course, I learned an important lesson as a young man about how and when to phrase questions to some students. “Must you take your purse with you to the bathroom?” I said to a young woman who reeked of cigarette smoke every time she came back from the bathroom. On her way out of the room and in front of the whole class, she yelled back, “Of course I do. Don’t you know I have my period!?! Am I supposed to show my tampons to the whole class?!” Yikes. Lesson learned. A day later—following advice from my CT—I spoke with this student in private about my concern about her smoking, and I apologized for embarrassing her. I also asked her to apologize for embarrassing me. We never became quite friendly in class, but things worked out well enough.

Of course, the most exciting thing about student teaching was getting to teach English. The poems, novels, and plays we read. The nonfiction texts and essay writing. The in-class speeches and discussions on varied and engaging topics. They were all richly fulfilling, and I was fascinated with the challenge of finding ways to engage and cajole very different kinds of students into serious work across the English language arts.

In the late 1980s, it was easier to secure a teaching position than when Leila was first looking, but after a summer of searching locally, I had to move about four hours away from home to upstate New York. I found a full-time high school English teaching position at a district in a suburb of Albany, where I also taught seventh- and eighth-grade English in the summers. I earned my master’s in English at night and in summer sessions. I got so excited about learning more about teaching—especially teaching writing—that after four years I left full-time teaching for four years to earn a doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition.

I've now been a teacher for over twenty-five years, and I've taught English from grade 7 through doctoral students. I'm most honored in the position I have now, directing an English teacher education program, in which I get to prepare others for the profession that has defined me and that I have helped to define for myself for over half my life.

Although, unlike Leila, I had a traditional teacher education background, it wasn't until I began teaching full-time that I discovered organizations like NCTE and its state affiliates. In my teacher education program, I learned a great deal about English and about education, but I didn't learn much specifically about English education. I learned about *English Journal* when I saw it lying on a table in the English department office. By reading this and books in English education (from presses such as Heinemann, NCTE, Teachers College, Corwin, and many others), I learned a great deal about teaching writing, responding to students' writing, creating effective assignments, using rubrics to give formative feedback, encouraging meaningful reading practices, and developing productive student discussion around literary and informational texts. I had a solid and valuable education background, but coupling that with my engagement with the field of English education really sent my learning skyward. And here I am retired as editor of *English Journal* and coauthoring a book with one of my professional heroes. And the hilarious stories I can tell about my own mess-ups and unexpected responses from students! What other profession gives us memories that so quickly evoke tears from laughter or poignancy?

How lucky we English teachers are to get to teach the best content to the most interesting students with the support of a vast network of professional colleagues. It makes those tough days all teachers face much easier to get through. And, as you read this book, you'll hear plenty more about my tough days and the many mistakes I've made and learned from.

Your Story: Becoming a Teacher

You are, right now, writing your own story of becoming a teacher, and one emphasis of this book, besides imparting technical and professional information, is to encourage you to look at yourself and your experiences. It is dangerous to generalize from yourself to each and every one of your students, yet it is also terribly shortsighted not to use your own insights and discoveries when you think about teaching and being and becoming a teacher. Being self-conscious and self-aware can be a powerful tool as you begin this great adventure. Our belief in that power is the major reason we start this book with our own stories—some of which are less than flattering—of how we became teachers.

Throughout this book we will tell more of our stories and let some of our students—who, like you, are embarking on their first years as English language arts teachers—tell theirs. Their words, coming as they do from the journal entries and papers of “experts”

at this being and becoming, may help you puzzle out some of the great issues facing middle and secondary language arts teachers.

Finally, this book outlines existing research and knowledge about classrooms and students and teachers, patterns and techniques and concepts.

The Limitation of Any One Person's Point of View

We are, as are many in this business of teaching, conscious of the limitations of one person's perspective. Leila can tell you that she has been a teacher for almost thirty years, that she has two degrees in English and one in education, that she has publications and editorships, and that she has been elected to professional offices. She can tell you she has taught in private and public schools; has taught remedial classes and classes for the gifted; has taught experimental courses, summer enrichment programs, and even classes for adults in a city jail. She can tell you that just recently she went back to high school teaching for a semester and learned a lot about schools and young people today.

Ken can tell you that he has been teaching for just over twenty-five years, that he has three degrees in English (including a specialty in Rhetoric and Composition), that he has published on his own and with colleagues—and, like Leila, he has been editor of *English Journal*. He has taught in two public high schools, two public universities, and one private university. He has taught students grade 7 through graduate school; he's taught both struggling and academically talented students, but he has never taught an honors class. He has also consulted with many English teachers and administrators to address and improve schoolwide literacy.

Yet we also need to remind you that we each come from a background, a culture, and that we bring with us a specific perspective and a point of view. To a certain extent we both have earned the right to talk to you in this book, to function as experts. Our experiences, though, are not universal, and everything we feel about teaching and learning may not echo the feelings of others—may not, in fact, echo yours.

The books and articles we cite are ones we like and have read. The activities and games and procedures we propose are ones we used as high school teachers and suggest our students use in their own English classes. We do not want to imply that we have read everything in the field or that we have experienced every conceivable teaching approach. We offer what we know with the acknowledgment that it is—as is all knowledge—undeniably partial.

Finally, the two of us are greatly aware of the many people—pioneers in this business of English teaching, great thinkers, gifted theorists—who have written and practiced at levels we can only dream of. Neither of us assumes that we are their equals. We take heart, however, from a section of *The Four Quartets* and add our slices of teaching experience, largely because of what T. S. Eliot reminds us:

*There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions*

*That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (1952, 128)*

Making the Journey

So, what about this *trying* that Eliot talks about? Actually, it goes to the heart of teaching and is the reason for the title of this book. Regardless of how prepared or unprepared for English teaching you may be, you are from day one a teacher making a journey. But the paradox is that from day one you will continue to become, evolve, and change as a teacher. It is, oddly enough, happily enough, a simultaneous process of both *being* a teacher and *becoming* a teacher. The two events are not separable and, actually, are not mutually exclusive.

Right now you are probably a lot more interested in arriving at your destination than in making the journey. You are more concerned about *being* a teacher: looking like the real thing, acting like a person who can take charge of a class, negotiating a school day gracefully. But as you will see or have perhaps already glimpsed, *becoming*, the ongoing process of changing and shifting and redefining, is also part of this business of teaching.

And that is what makes teaching so exciting: it is never the same. Not only, of course, are the students different each year, each class, but, necessarily, so are you. Unless you lose your curiosity and passion and interest—in which case it's time to find another career—teaching will continue to evolve and change, *become* more and more, as you continue in the profession.

Teaching Today

These are tough times in which to be a teacher. Issues of curricular mandate, high-stakes testing and reporting, school violence, value-added student learning, community involvement, and control swirl everywhere and threaten to overwhelm even the most dedicated. Numerous media reports focus on teachers as the major cause of American educational woes, and controversy over the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and mandated tests are often centered around teachers. When there are school shootings or student crises, some believe it is the teachers who should have anticipated, should have known, should have intervened, and teachers are often—sometimes unreasonably and unfairly—held strictly accountable.

For English language arts teachers, constant battles over which literature is of most value, how much writing can be squeezed into a crowded schedule, and how the teaching of skills can be balanced with the excitement of reading and talking about texts complicate the picture. Despite these issues, you have decided to make the journey, to *be* (and to continue to *become*) an English language arts teacher. For that decision, you have our respect, and all of us in the classroom welcome you into the profession. It is exhausting and exhilarating and important work, work that is as enduring as it is difficult.

Teaching is the central defining truth of our lives, the core and heart of our identity. For you, too, teaching may become that important and that sustaining. Not for the complacent nor for the fainthearted, making the journey toward being and becoming a teacher is an adventure of the first order.

For Your Journal



Journals are a good way to keep track of your thoughts and ideas. Many times, after reading a section of this book, you will be invited to write a response to the issues and ideas raised. If you wonder how those responses should “look,” you might pay close attention to the passages we provide. We quote students who, like you, are entering teaching and who, in our classes, use a journal or blog to record ideas and questions and responses.

Journals can be handwritten or typed, and an entry should be two or three pages long; they are informal and should be concerned more with ideas and content than with correctness or spelling or even neatness. The point is to address a subject or issue and to *write your way into* ideas and answers. This last phrase is crucial: these journal entries are not meant to *record* what you have concluded but to help you *find out* what you know and believe. Writing can be a means for learning what you think.

So, in this first journal entry, think of how people get started in a profession and how that may or may not relate to your choosing to be a teacher. One way to start might be to do some quick field research on how people choose professions: interview two or three people about how they entered their job field; informally poll relatives, friends, or coworkers.

Use the following questions as idea starters; you don’t have to answer all of them, but they may help you focus this journal entry about people and choosing professions.

Questions to consider for your interviews: How did you choose your profession? What attracted you to that type of work? How long did you stay/have you stayed in the field? Why did you/didn’t you leave? What do you consider to be the greatest rewards of your profession? The greatest drawbacks?

Now, think about you. Very briefly, in a paragraph or two, write about what has attracted you to English teaching. Was it an actual experience with a teacher? A film or a book about teaching? Some other “trigger” (such as reading—and being moved by—a literary work)? Are your feelings about teaching similar to or different from the feelings of those you interviewed about their careers? How?

Teacher, Student, School: The Dance of the Three

The quotation at the beginning of this chapter, written by Deborah Brandt as the foreword to one of the most comprehensive histories of English teaching in the United States, is relatively sobering. Although it may not be the first thing you wish to contemplate as you think about being and becoming a teacher, the nature of the task and the many factors involved do indeed make our work nothing less than highly complex. Brandt writes about “operat[ing] in fraught circumstances” (2010, x), and she is both