

TEXAS VOICES



A NEWSLETTER OF THE TEXAS COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

President's corner: Reflections on 2020

By Amanda Palmer, President

Fifty-three days into 2021 and most of Texas is already bruised and bashed with a new appreciation for the glories of running water and electricity. It's been a rough five years. 2017 brought the all-encompassing Hurricane Harvey. Since then, Imelda, Hanna, Marco, Laura, and Beta have each touched some part of Texas shores. There were book challenges for novels such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Just Another Hero* by Sharon Draper, and *Stamped* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. We've had wildfires, accidents, oh, and a pandemic that spawned a reimagining of nearly everything in education. COVID-19 has cost half a million American lives and the number continues to grow. Teachers are working on the frontlines waiting for access to vaccines. Then, for Valentine's Day 2021, the lights went out. For days.

Namaste. Mercy. What's the magic word? The paragraph above is heavy. Heavy to write. Heavy to read. Heavy to live. In times like these, self-care is critical. For many, their faith is the bedrock for survival. Another important aspect for me, especially in education, is *knowing my why*. I believe every student is one caring adult away from changing the world, and I never want to miss my shot to be that adult. That's my why. It's what gets me to work everyday and helps me fight for equity and access in literacy. What's your why?

Once the why of the work is set, it becomes a north star. It will get you to work, but it isn't what keeps you there. Connecting with others and finding joy in this wonderful profession will do that. The 2021 Annual Conference highlighted the power of connections as over 400 members gathered online to discover joy in literacy with speakers such as Ernest Morrell, Matt de la Pena, Lester Laminack, and Jacqueline Woodson. Participants left the conference excited to adapt what they had learned for their classrooms and surprised at how much they enjoyed the online experience. Past President Stephen Winton did an outstanding job creating an entirely new style of learning for TCTELA in a very short time frame.

During the conference, I announced the 2022 conference theme. *Challenge Accepted: Teaching with Strength and Resilience in Times of Change*. I challenged TCTELA members in the days, weeks, and months to come to ponder the words of former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "So often in life things that you regard as an impediment turn out to be great good fortune."

Hurricanes are rough. The ice storm and failure of the electrical grid was catastrophic. The 2020 pandemic has required so much change and led to great loss. But, what silver linings remain? Look for the great, good fortune that is tucked into these experiences. What has been learned through these hardships? What skills were gained?

What if we did this for the remainder of 2021? What if we accepted this challenge and returned in 2022 to share all that we've learned while building on the new... to address equity, to take care of our mental health, to support socioemotional learning through literacy, to grow strong, resilient readers and writers?

CONTENTS

President's corner: Reflections on 2020	1
Reflections on the NCTE and TCTELA annual conferences	2
Not this word, but that one.....	3
A call for non-BIPOC communities to lean into their learning and unlearning	4
Re-energizing during the 2021 conference	5
Advice from Matt de la Peña	6
Financial Update	7
Leaning toward the light	8
Retreating into story	9
The dark side of goal setting	10
Literacy education day.....	11
Are you care-full or care-less?	11
Book review: <i>Atomic habits: tiny changes, remarkable results</i>	12
Call for Submissions.....	13

I invite you to ride this wave of change with me. Let's see what we can learn and share as we all strive to increase our strength and resilience.

It isn't easy. Change is hard. It's a challenge. When I need motivation, I look to words for inspiration. Lately, I am turning to Amanda Gorman and her work of art, "The Hill We Climb" from the 2021 Presidential Inauguration. I particularly focus on these lines:

But one thing is certain,
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy,
and change our children's birthright.

I look forward to learning from you and with you in the coming year.

References:

Foussianes, Chloe. News Writer for Townandcountrymag.com, (2021, February 17). *Amanda Gorman's Poem Stole the Show at the Inauguration. Read It Again Here*. Town & Country. <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a35279603/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript>.

Makers. (2012). *Ruth Bader Ginsburg: Rejected by the Firm. "Another Token."* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldFUuU-OZIU>.

Reflections on the NCTE and TCTELA annual conferences

By Stephen Winton, Ed.D., Past President

Attending the 2020 National Council of Teachers of English Annual Conference offered many points for reflection.

Dr. Robert Probst stated, “We should be enabling kids to reshape themselves...and ultimately reshape the world...to take what they read and recast it” (2020). This made me think about the overarching theme of reading for change in Dr. Kylee Beers and Probst’s work. Too often, reading instruction is limited to low bars such as identifying the central idea or passing a standardized test. One powerful aspect of reading is that we might walk away from a text as a slightly different person, and reading gives us the power to change our world. That is exciting stuff that might lead to joyful and meaningful reading.

I found a connection to Probst’s statement when Penny Kittle said, “Anytime something cataclysmic happens...it’s such a time to say what matters most” (2020). Kittle spoke after the tragic events of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic, violent acts of oppression against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and political strife that threatened our democracy. Indeed, less than two months after the conference, we saw insurrection against the United States Capitol. Reading offers the chance to reflect on universal themes such as equality, kindness, peace, tolerance, truth, justice, and bravery—the values we wish for in our country and our world. And writing allows us to express our ideas for positive change.

I was honored to take part in the 56th Annual Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts Conference. There, Dr. Ernest Morrell said, “Multicultural literature helps students understand and like themselves and others” (2021). He went on to argue, “For success, a kid needs two things: a goal he values and a belief he can achieve it” (2021). This made me think: What if we made using multicultural literature to help students understand and like themselves and others a stronger focus in our work? How much tragedy might be prevented? How many positive changes might be made in our world?

Many other presenters reflected on the conference theme *Connections: Crafting Instruction to Find Joy in Literacy*. Energized by connecting with fellow educators and hopeful of our work of connecting our world through literacy, the conference lifted my spirits in a challenging time.

Thank you to all presenters, vendors, volunteers, board members, rising leaders, and attendees for your contributions to the conference. Now I am looking forward to the 2022 TCTELA Annual Conference led by President Amanda Palmer!

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Morrell, E. (2021, January). Opening keynote. Presentation at the 2021 Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts Annual Conference.

Probst, R., Beers, K., Rief, L., & Kittle, P. (2020, November). Changing our worlds: Why HOW we read matters. Presentation at the 2020 National Council of Teachers of English Annual Conference.



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Not this word, but that one

By Roni Burren, President Elect

We've all heard it before. I'm sure we've all said it before. Words mean things. It's kind of at the heart of what we do as literacy educators. We talk about words and what they mean. Our chosen field is language—and the power that lies within it. Language has the power to uplift and oppress. Because of that, we should always examine the words we're using.

In listening to educational podcasts, webinars, and social media posts I've noticed the prevalence of ableist language. Access Living, an advocacy group for the disabled community, defines ableism as "the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing' and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than' and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions and generalizations of people with disabilities" ([AccessLiving.org](https://www.accessliving.org)). With this definition as a backdrop, ableist language is defined as words or phrases that reinforce misconceptions, stereotypes and generalization of people with disabilities.



Our language in our classrooms should be reflective of this knowledge. In the table below is a list of common ableist words/phrases and alternatives for those words.

As we stand in front of children, we need to be aware that our words could be alienating to our kids. We should make conscious decisions about what we say, as it has the power to push kids out, or pull kids in. The absolute most important aspect of removing ableist language from our vocabulary is that it becomes a teachable

moment (cue an anchor chart) for students. How powerful will it be for students to leave our classrooms with these words completely removed from their daily language? Imagine them telling their friends, parents and the world about ableist words—about the power of language.

Reference:

Access living. (2021, February 04). Retrieved February 24, 2021, from <https://www.accessliving.org>

Ableist Word/Phrase	Alternative
Insane	Unreal
Crazy	Unbelievable
Bipolar	Moody
Crippled	Dismantled
Mad house	Unruly
Lame	Boring
"I'm OCD about..."	"I'm particular about..."

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A call for non-BIPOC communities to lean into their learning and unlearning

By Dr. Lois Marshall Barker, Teacher Development Section Chair



As a member of the BIPOC community, there comes a certain weight of simply being in non-BIPOC spaces. This weight comes from the pressure always to educate and justify why racism exists and how it needs to be dismantled, when in fact, this work is a shared process. In *Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos*, Dr. King writes:

“Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention. There is no other answer. Constructive social change will bring certain tranquility; evasions will merely encourage turmoil. Negroes hold only one key to the double lock of peaceful change. The other is in the hands of the white community.”

Last year, this weight became unbearable after the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Again, members of the BIPOC community took to the streets to vocalize that racism is still woven into the fabric of American society. Again, members of the BIPOC community found themselves called upon to recommend books and lead talks in non-BIPOC spaces on fighting racism, being better, and unifying a society. It has been over 400 years since captors brought enslaved people to North America. It has been 158 years since Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. It has been over 140 years since Native Americans had their land rights stripped away. It has been a mere 67 years since schools were desegregated and 57 years since the Jim Crow Era came to an “end.” Whether it was 158 years or 57 years ago, members of the BIPOC community have taken to the streets, have always been involuntarily tasked with educating the masses in an effort to promote the unlearning of racist ideas and practices, and at the same time justify their existence and why the fight is indeed necessary. This work is not new. This learning and unlearning is not a novel concept. Yet, it is treated as such.

The constant barrage of questions and requests to explain what is broken, what is unjust, and why racism exists not only brings about an ancestral rage, but also the weight of racial

trauma. Every time a member of the BIPOC community leads the learning and unlearning, they relive the violence of racism against themselves and their entire communities. These moments many non-BIPOC folk deem as “coming to the table” to learn and unite are not always safe, open spaces as they come without decentering themselves and checking their biases, and this surfaces through questions and push back—the “microaggressions.” Thus, there must come a time when the BIPOC community steps back from the role of teacher and let those who are ready to engage in the work lead themselves and lean into members of their communities who are doing the work.

But how can BIPOC folk walk away from that work, from the facilitation of that crucial learning and unlearning? Why should they walk away? It is important not to view this step back from the conversation as a complete abandonment of the work but as a time to replenish spirits and let the other communities hold that key Dr. King spoke of. It is a time to set boundaries; boundaries preserve internal peace and offer space and time to heal from trauma.



Setting boundaries can look like:

- Passing the mic to non-BIPOC folk who are well steeped in the work to lead those crucial conversations.
- Limiting social media engagement in circles that require heavy lifting or after an event that may trigger racial trauma.
- Saying no to requests to lead learning and unlearning.
- Reliving racial trauma and the constant carrying of this weight must be acknowledged by members of non-BIPOC communities to begin to fulfill what Dr. King says is needed to create a more peaceful, just society.

Reference:

King, M.L. (1968). *Where do we go from where: Chaos or community*. Beacon Press.

Re-energizing during the 2021 conference

By Alissa Crabtree, Recording Secretary



Exhausted. Exhausted seems to be the only word that is adequate for how my colleagues and I felt during the first few weeks of January. We came back from the winter break knowing that it would be “full steam ahead,” and given the additions that come from facilitating learning during a pandemic, we were all hanging on by a thread. The TCTELA

Conference is just what we needed to refresh and re-energize.

As the conference approached, I found excitement in reading through the program and selecting the sessions I would attend. I could not wait to learn from other top-notch educators, and the General Session lineup was top-notch. Even though this year’s conference was virtual, I was “packed and ready to go” with my notebook, pens, and laptop. I prepared my home office, informed my family that I would be unavailable during the conference time, and grabbed my favorite blue-light glasses. Each year, the TCTELA Conference provides me with a giant boost of energy. I get to see old friends, make new friends, and collaborate with educators all over our great state. I knew that a virtual conference would be different; however, I also knew that TCTELA would deliver the absolute best. I can honestly say that I left the 2021 Conference with a renewed sense of community, fresh perspectives on critical issues our students face, and valuable tools that I could immediately turn around in the classroom.

The TCTELA lineup was outstanding. Jacquelyn Woodson, Ernest Morrell, Penny Kittle, Colleen Cruz, and Matt de la Peña are just a few of the big names that presented during the General Sessions. I was in complete awe and embarrassingly “fangirled” during each of their presentations. My fellow literacy nerds and I found ourselves emotionally struck by each of their messages. We would text one another after each session, and I do believe I used the crying emoji more than once. Not only did they provide us with messages of research and pedagogy, but they also left us with a renewed sense of self and purpose. Although I diligently took notes from each of these rockstars, the one session that made a lasting impression on me was Matt de la Peña’s, where he read his latest book, *Milo Imagines the World*. If you have not done so, go out and obtain a copy of this marvelous text. It does not matter which grade level you teach. There is something for everyone, and the message needs to be heard.

Besides the general sessions, there were great breakout sessions in which to choose. I had the opportunity to attend several breakout sessions that provided me with tools to turn around immediately with my fellow teachers. First, I attended “Transforming Student Thinking About Immigration Through the Use of Language Charts,” presented by Jessica Murdter-Atkinson and Elizabeth Ries. During this session, Atkinson and Ries discussed using language charts to gather text evidence regarding specific concepts and ideas. They modeled the use of language charts with the classroom read-aloud, and my peers and I have begun using them with both the classroom read-aloud

and independent books of choice. Students identify text that impacts or supports their thinking, and they are using those findings to justify their answers to our essential questions. To the right is a picture of students leaving the text they found during the independent reading time on a classroom language chart. They placed their text on a sticky note, and as they left the class, they put their evidence under the appropriate essential question.

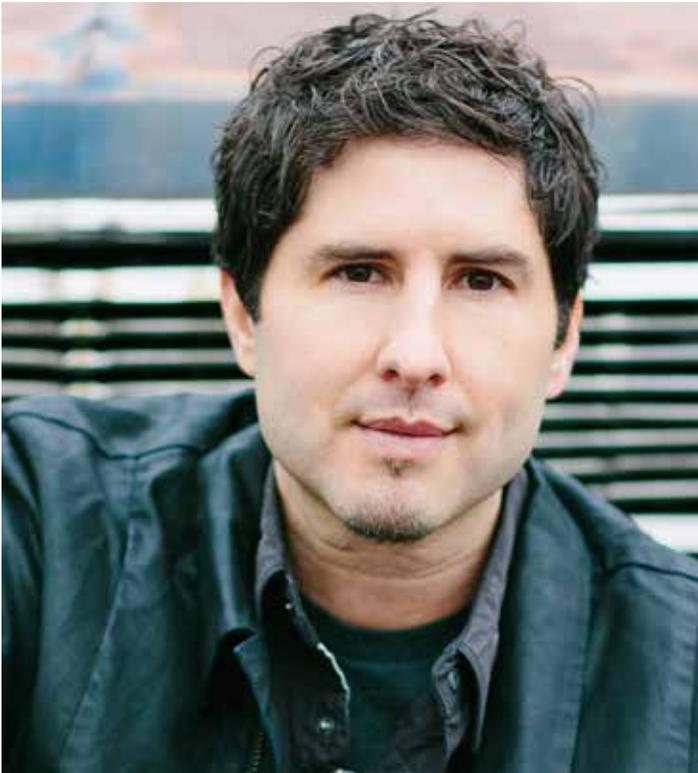
One event in particular that I am grateful I attended was Poetry Night. This event was held late in the evening on Saturday, and I am not going to lie, I was tired. I had spent the day attending sessions via Zoom, and my brain was bursting with new knowledge to digest. I was looking forward to it, though, because I knew that several of my friends and colleagues would be there. During this time, I laughed out loud, I cried, and I applauded our TCTELA members’ talents. What a night! We literally spent time sharing poetry that we had written or that had impacted us in some way. It was an excellent way to spend my Saturday evening. I left Poetry Night feeling re-energized and eager to create. I urge everyone to attend Poetry Night during our 2022 Conference. It will not disappoint.



The theme for the 2021 Conference was Connections - crafting instruction to discover joy in literacy. TCTELA delivered, for I felt the conference feeling more connected than ever, and I felt fully restored to tackle the work ahead. The world of education is not one for the faint of heart; however, I think it is the most excellent profession. It is an honor to teach the youth of this world. The TCTELA Conference reminded me of my purpose, gave me the boost I needed to support my colleagues, and inspired me to be the best literacy advocate I know that I can be.

Advice from Matt de la Peña

By Valerie Taylor, PD2Teach Liaison



At TCTELA's first ever virtual conference, we welcomed Matt de la Peña as one of our keynote speakers. Matt shared his thoughts about being a writer and a speaker, and he shared his journey from not being a reader to becoming a writer for his profession. In sharing his story, he reminded us of the importance of our roles as teachers for the students in our classrooms. When we become frustrated with students because they are not acting the way we would want or doing the things we ask of them, we need to put aside the images we have constructed about the *perfect student*, and as Matt puts it, "Teach who the child before you might become." We may never see the results of doing this, but the student will—and Matt did. He had a teacher who saw in him what he didn't yet see in himself, and partly because of that, he is an author and educator today.

Teaching these future children means believing in them and helping them be the readers and writers we know they are. For students who are having difficulty seeing the beauty in the world, Matt shared that reading can offer that view because "books let us leave the oppressive feelings we might have...[and] let us see something beautiful." Books are also "vehicles to conversations: inside your head, between peers, between teachers and students, between parents and children—and we need to leave space for the different conversation." As teachers, we have a responsibility to offer students the opportunities to have these conversations and offer them books that encourage these conversations, books that, as Matt's books do, offer our students the mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors that Rudine Sims Bishop described in her essay in 1990.

To remember that means to remember that, as Sims Bishop (1990) wrote, "When the lighting conditions are right...a window can also

become a mirror." Matt shared a story with us to illustrate this point. He described an author visit to a school where he didn't find many of his own books in the library. When he asked about it, the librarian replied, "We don't have those kinds of kids in our school." Matt's response? "How many wizards do you have in your school?" If we offer our children books filled with fantasy where they imagine a world so different from their own while still seeing themselves, we can also offer our students realistic fiction that depicts a world different from the one they live in but where they can still see similarities. Jeff Wilhelm and Michael Smith with Sharon Fransen (2014) discuss this idea in their book *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—And Why We Should Let Them* when they write about various pleasures involved with reading: reading itself, play, work, intellectual, and social. In the chapter, "The Harry Potter Phenomenon," the authors share the words of one of their student "informants" who pointed out that the Harry Potter books were "all about dealing with dilemmas and problems like we are facing right then and how to be good friends" (p. 172). Our students need to read books that represent lives different from their own and in doing so recognize our common humanity. Our students do, of course, also need to see themselves and their lives represented in books as Matt did when he read *The House of Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Before reading Cisneros' book, Matt wasn't a reader, but this book changed that for him.

Lucky for us that Matt not only became a reader but also a writer. During his keynote, he reminded us that "Writing makes you a writer." What important words to pass along to our students to help them see themselves as writers. Matt also pointed out that "A good writer doesn't go into a story with a message. A good writer does, however, go into a story with a point of view." What



if we helped our students approach their writing for school with this advice in mind—not what is your point, but what is your point of view? How would this shift help students step into the assignments we place in front of them? Knowing that their points of view matter might make all the difference in students seeing themselves as writers.

At the end of Matt's keynote, he answered a few questions, one of them being, "How do you handle when people disagree with

Continued on next page

Advice from Matt de la Peña (continued)

your point of view?” First, he responded by saying that he loved the question because it is so hard (a question worth considering). Then he said, “Have humility! There is no one story for everyone’s experience.” As teachers, it is important to remember these words for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

Thank you to Matt de la Peña for his inspiring words.

If you haven’t already, check out these books by Matt de la Peña:

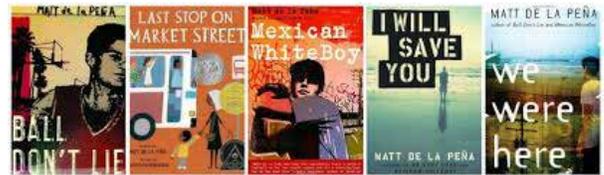
- **Young Adult**
 - ▶ *Ball Don’t Lie*
 - ▶ *Mexican White Boy*
 - ▶ *We Were Here*
 - ▶ *I Will Save You*
 - ▶ *The Living*
 - ▶ *DC Icons: Superman Dawnbreaker*
 - ▶ *The Living Series* (The Living and The Hunted)
- **Middle Grades**
 - ▶ *Curse of the Ancients* (Book 4 of the Infinity Ring Series)
 - ▶ *Eternity* (Book 8 of the Infinity Ring Series)
- **Picture Books**
 - ▶ *Milo Imagines the World* (illustrated by Christian Robinson)

- ▶ *Carmela Full of Wishes* (illustrated by Christian Robinson)
- ▶ *Love* (illustrated by Loren Long)
- ▶ *Miguel and the Grand Harmony* (illustrated by Ana Ramirez)
- ▶ *Last Stop on Market Street* (illustrated by Christian Robinson)
- ▶ *A Nation’s Hope: The Story of Boxing Legend Joe Louis* (illustrated by Kadir Nelson)

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Sims Bishop, R. (1990) “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.” *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*. 6, (3)No. 3. <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

Wilhelm, J.D. & Smith, M. W. (2014). *Reading unbound: Why kids need to read what they want and why we should let them*. New York: Scholastic.



Financial Update

By Margaret Hale, Executive Secretary

Here we are nearing the end of the first quarter of 2021, still in the midst of a global pandemic, having just experienced widespread power outages and loss of water due to a winter storm, yet we persevere! TCTELA is pleased to report that even with all of the challenges of the past year, the organization remains in sound financial shape.

Although we had to move the annual conference to a virtual format, we still managed to draw a large crowd and were able to bring in income via conference registrations while at the same time lowering the registration cost to support membership during this difficult time.

The TCTELA board has set a goal to work to maintain the equivalent of 1½ year’s operating expenses in reserves. We

continue to have a little over one year in reserves. TCTELA by the numbers: *English in Texas*, TCTELA’s peer reviewed journal has a circulation of 1100 readers. TCTELA has 1000 members throughout Texas. The annual conference brings in 90% of the organization’s income. Most importantly, TCTELA uses that income to invest in YOU, our members. We continue to invest in the membership via monthly TCTELA webinars on a variety of topics. Please follow us on social media and on our website to reserve your spot in these enlightening webinars.

Please reach out if you have questions.

from the blogosphere...

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Leaning toward the light

By Charles Moore, Vice-President Elect

I've never stared at a lamp the way that I did on that particular Tuesday morning. The house was slowly warming up after the electricity blinked back on at 4 am, and, while my family settled back to sleep, I sat on the couch silently thanking whomever it was that flipped the switch—or hit the button—that sent power flowing back to our home. Forty-five minutes later, the lamp flickered out and the heater powered down, but that time with the light helped illuminate an end to this experience that existed just outside the reach of the light until that moment. I know that even days later some Texans still don't have heat in their homes and that our time without it was not as traumatizing as it felt sitting within my privileged existence.

As my thoughts turn towards the students and teachers that we once again welcome back into our buildings, I think about how this experience further compounds the trauma our society has experienced over the past year. I also think about the unknown traumas that our teachers and students face that are unrelated to freezing conditions or a pandemic but are maybe even more difficult to endure.

I say all that to share this: We can, once again, create a safe space for our teachers and students. We can provide support and grace for the adults who will return to campus after having been sent home to sit in their anxiety while trying their best to hold it together for the sake of their families and themselves. We should welcome our students back into classrooms that provide safety and a sense of normalcy for their emotional health and for ours. Now more than ever, literacy lessons should be grounded in authentic literacy experiences wherein students can explore themselves when they explore the words on the page.

We should write. All of us. Just like our pipes, sometimes our writing voices freeze up, but as they thaw, we should let the words flow. And we can't fear what comes out. Even if it threatens to take our minds back to the cold, dark nights, we must embrace the catharsis that accompanies the expression of our thoughts on the page. Teachers should write with their students, and students desperately need to see the words of their writing mentors as they burst forth. A shared connection is something we all need as we emerge from the isolation that the pandemic and the storm forced upon us. We need the chance to participate in the dialogic learning that we fold into our literacy communities. The social-emotional healing that is needed right now far exceeds our capacity as therapists but cannot ever overwhelm our writing notebooks.



When we think about the healing that must happen, let's think about the shared experiences of writing beside a mentor text or brainstorming the big ideas we see in what we read and write. Once again, we get the chance to learn about ourselves and the world beyond our bubble. When we commit to that process, we will find outcomes that blow us away. The kids will surprise us, and we need to be ready to soak in their brilliance.

Building a community is an ongoing process and our work is never done. Hopefully, the repetitive stress of situations beyond our control has bolstered our resolve regarding the strength of the foundation we've built. Let's let our students embrace the idea of productive struggle. Maybe this is the chance for us to throw off the masks that we use to hide our scars so that we can bear our souls without having to share our darkest secrets. Vulnerability is scary, but the clarity of purpose that lies within us is a gift that our teachers and students deserve.

I don't think we will ever become comfortable with the learning interruptions that have become an almost part of education. I don't think we want to. If we normalize this cycle wherein our learning environments are repeatedly torn down and rebuilt, then we normalize the lack of clarity that makes our work that much harder. Instead, let's make it easier, truer, and cathartic.

Retreating into story

By Caty Dearing, Vice-President Elect

Do yoga. Put on a face mask. Put together a puzzle. Go to bed early. Drink more water. The repeated mantra of the self-care movement—just DO more, be better, add another task to the routine, and somehow Pinterest, Twitter, or the other powers that be will protect your physical and mental health. Just thinking about adding yet another “do” to my list might crumple the mental Jenga tower I’m building each day.

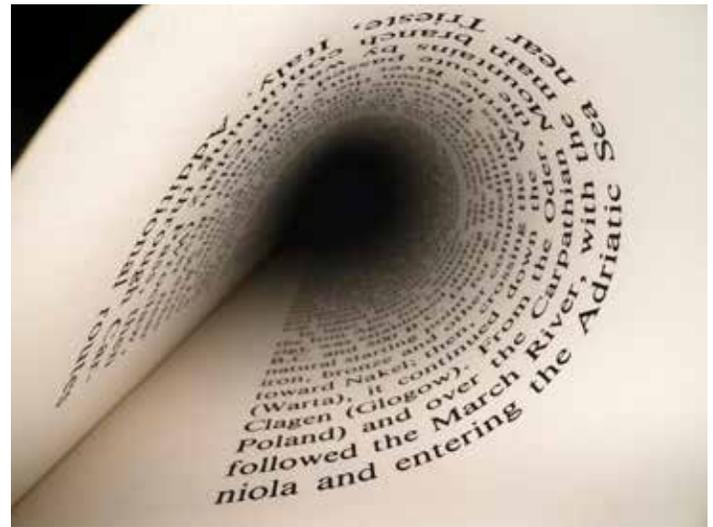


At the end of last school year, I found myself in a dangerous state of burnout. Working from home had removed one of the only firm boundaries I’d been able to set for myself as an educator—the act of physically walking out the door, getting in the car and driving home. I would look up from my laptop, see 10:00 p.m. blinking on the microwave, struggle to go to sleep, then wake up around 7:00 a.m. to do it all over again. My eyes were constantly hurting, my back had begun feeling weak from all of the sitting and hunching I was doing, and I never felt like I could reach a stopping point because there was always *more*: more emails, more lessons to write, more professional learning to plan...the list kept accumulating off the page.

One of my tasks during the Spring 2020 shift to remote learning was to vet online resources that were being advertised and shared with teachers. I had just learned about Libby, an app that connects to the public library and enables you to check out books. I had loaded it onto my tablet and was exploring the account when I saw a digital library shelf of YA featured books that I had yet to read. It occurred to me that, uncharacteristically, I hadn’t touched a book in over a month. I glanced over at the stack of professional learning books beside my chair, ones I had tried over and over to read but did not have the capacity to process. They’d become more of an additional coffee table than anything else, balancing old mugs and erasable pens. I shifted my attention back to my iPad, loaded a YA fantasy novel instead, and dove in, coming up for air hours later only to download the next in the series.

Within the scope of a month, I read 20 books in this same manner. I replaced my research-based peer reviewed texts with fairies, zombies, apocalyptic settings of all sorts and styles. I devoured romance, science fiction, horror, thriller, anything with an engaging title and a fun cover. And slowly, with the close of each text and the opening of the next, I began to feel like myself. The knots in my shoulders were loosening, I was laughing more, and I felt reenergized in the work I was doing, getting more accomplished during the day that allowed me to shut down sooner and easier. The time I was spending each night reading was providing me with healing that Sephora couldn’t dream of providing.

I realize as an adult that one of the most powerful ways I’ve always coped with trauma is through reading to escape. As a kid, I often retreated from the classrooms and playgrounds where I felt “other” into the fictional world of story, finding community and hope with the Pevensie children, the Animorphs or the members of the Baby-Sitters Club. Escaping into these fictional worlds enabled me to process my real one, giving me the emotional capacity and schema to address my troubles and find my place in the world.



The same holds true today as it has for me all my life. As I write this article in front of my fireplace while Texas is frozen solid, I shift back and forth between my low-battery laptop and my latest copy of a gothic horror novel. My daughter, cheeks red from playing in the snow, now lays upside down on our couch, engrossed in her newest copy of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, a series she’s almost completed in mere weeks. We find solace and care in the characters we love, and though we initially retreat into text to escape, we return feeling found, seen, and a little bit more cared for than before.

The dark side of goal setting

By Ande Parlow, High School Section Chair

One of my favorite parts of conferences is looking on social media and seeing all the wonderful tidbits of wisdom that everyone is internalizing during the sessions. I love to see how so many people can be in the same presentation and walk away with different ideas to incorporate into their teaching lives and the lives of their students. This last TCTELA conference found most of my social media abuzz with this particular quote from Jacqueline Woodson, “I was a slow reader. Always. Sadly, that wasn’t allowed. We’re still rushing people through books. I read sentences over and over.”

This particular intelligence reminded me of my own reading habits from the year before. Oh 2020, what a time in my reading life! I would check into my Goodreads account only to be reminded of my horrible ineptitude as it announced to me that I was 45 books behind my reading goal for the year—a quite unrealistic 165 books. Just one more failure on my part as an educator and a reading warrior during a super stressful time in my professional and personal life.

When did reading become a contest? Why had I put myself there? Who was I even competing against? I really don’t know how to answer any of those questions. I have always turned to books to provide me some comfort in times of crisis, a release from my day to day worries, or even as a way to go places I will probably never be able to actually visit. Yet, lately, I keep seeing people who view reading as many books as possible per year as a goal that may be hurting us instead of helping.

Don’t get me wrong. I read. Like I read a lot. The first time I even got a Goodreads account, I think I just wanted to see how much I actually did read per year. I hadn’t even really thought about it until reading Pernille Ripp’s *Passionate Readers* and seeing her chart of book covers and realizing I should be doing that in my own room. Then I started following her on Instagram and was so amazed at her reading prowess. She is MY reading hero. So, I started doing it too. I even have my students do it as well. They have their own posters in my room, usually grouped by lit circles, with spaces to keep their own book covers from their year long reading journey. They don’t see it as a contest; I have even asked them. Some things they have said to me are “I like to see my progress through the year” and “I don’t really mind it. I feel like it does help a little cause it motivates you to read more books.” When asked if the kids who read more than them make them feel inferior or like they need to read faster, responses tend to be the same. One student said, “I have a normal feeling when I look at the book covers because I am a slow reader,” and “It’s good that some people read a lot more than me. I’m fine with my poster because I never read that much before.” Out of all the kids I surveyed, not one of them had a negative thing to say about visually keeping track of their reading in our classroom. They like to give me a hard time reading as fast as I do, and we even share some laughs about it.

So this interesting thing happened during quarantine though. I stepped away from reading. It was weird, and I don’t even think I realized I was doing it at the time. Then I came back to school in August and went to update my book covers and realized I had only read five books in June and five more in July and a mere two books in August. This was down from my usual 10 to 12 books



a month. I felt so let down in myself. I felt ashamed to let my students see how I had failed as a reader. The guilt was palpable. Should I lie? Should I post some things up so they see me still as a reading leader? I am embarrassed to say now that I did consider it. Instead, I left it. It became a talking point on the first day back to school. I would ask the kids, “Hey what do you think happened to me in June, July, and August?” It actually fueled some interesting conversations about how they had coped for those months as well. We all pretty much discovered that Netflix had taken over our lives a lot in those months. I even had to admit that I, too, got consumed with *Tiger King* and *Gilmore Girls*.

We must never forget that there can be a dark side to goal setting as well. When we openly discuss how much we read with others, we should always be cognizant of what that does to the other person. When I share with someone who sees themselves as lesser because they read 20 books a year, I always make sure to tell them that that is amazing. That reading any books a year is better than the national average. Setting unrealistic goals in Goodreads or other apps like that most likely puts too much pressure on one to do nothing other than read. If 2020 taught us nothing else, I think I walked away learning that I need to be a lot more realistic in my goals, especially for reading. I never want to hate reading because I forced myself to see it as a chore. I need reading to be that really important part of my own self care. Making ourselves do anything too much is only a space for ruin. Ultimately we are the ones who decide how much of something we need and how much is too much. Getting too wrapped up in competition, even with yourself, is not healthy.

As a reader, a teacher, a colleague, or a leader, you too are human. You are not in a contest with anyone else as to how you read—whether it be fast or slow—whether it be books or magazines—whether it be trashy romance novels or pivotal stories of social injustices. You are you. That is more than enough. I guarantee if you ask your students, they will agree. So as we focus on self care this month, and for so many of us reading is that—it is our go to self-care regimen—you are your own reading warrior and you are allowed, especially in these times, to read as much or little as you need.

Literacy education day

By Eva Goins, NCTE Liaison

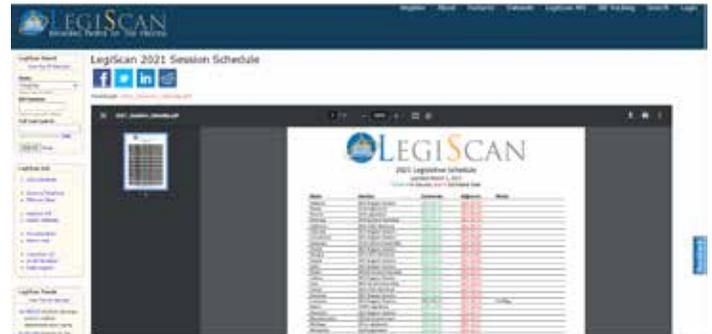
“The only way to find your voice is to use it,” states *New York Times* bestselling author Austin Kleon. This is not a foreign concept for any educator who wants their students to learn self efficacy in becoming their own advocate. In fact educators empower and encourage their students to use their voice to inspire others with their thoughts and beliefs.

Yet, educators themselves don't always practice what they teach. Instead of using their voice for change, they sit in the teacher's lounge or log into multiple social media platforms and do what society sees as merely complaining. It is time for educators to find and use their voices.

One of TCTELA's Core Values is to advocate for students and educators. Every year, the council leads an initiative known as Literacy Education Day. This opportunity is for educators to visit legislative offices at the capitol in Austin to express their support or expertise on a particular subject or legislation.

The pandemic and continuing fluidity of this year has prompted the council to shift to a virtual event. Literacy Education Day will be a webinar on March 24 from 6:30-7:30 p.m. It will showcase a variety of panelists that will expound on the importance of advocacy to the ins and outs of how to make one's opinions and experiences known.

As the 87th Texas Legislative Session continues through May 31, educators can use their voices now. There are various sources that can be used fairly easily to keep notice about what is important to educators across the state.



Legiscan.com offers a free registration for its users. The website offers an opportunity for inundated educators to track and follow bills that are introduced. Another useful website hosted by the Texas Government is the [Texas Legislature Online](https://www.texas.gov/legislature). TLO allows you to set up bill lists as well as alerts.

Educators can also reach out to their representatives in the Texas Senate or the Texas House of Representatives by sending emails, letters, or making phone calls. To get a list of representatives in specific locations in Texas, one can visit: <https://wrm.capitol.texas.gov/home>.

Join TCTELA on March 24 for [Challenge Accepted: Advocacy for the Classroom](#).

Are you care-full or care-less?

By Dr Mary White & Dr. Angie Durand, Editors English In Texas



We are almost thirty days away from a full year of social distancing and the wearing of masks. What was once a paradigm shift has become a way of life, almost routine-like. We even have designer masks, masks with our favorite team, masks with pictures, and on and on. What was a burden has now become a fashion statement.

In the routine of 6-foot social distancing, have we also become distant from our own soul, thoughts, and emotions? In other words, have we become care-less with our personal mental well-

being or care-full with attention to our individual needs? Have you ever felt like you were walking on a balance beam called life?

What are some general touch points to alert you to becoming a care-less person? Change in eating habits, or sleep patterns are signals. Alternatively, perhaps, you were once socially comfortable, but due to news of new strands of Covid you have become wary of people altogether?

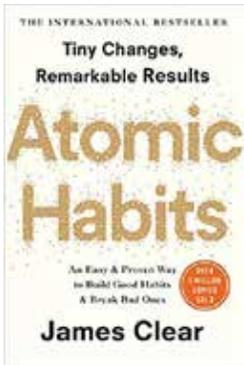
On the other hand, how can you become care-full? I am glad you asked. My all-time favorite self-care activity is meditation. Others include exercise, reading a book by your favorite author, an outside walk in the park or even watching children at play. I urge you to reflect on what you find as your favorite self-care activity and make yourself take time to be care-full daily. (Tchiki, 2018).

Reference:

Tchiki, Davis, (2018). *Self-Care: 12 ways to take better care of yourself*. Retrieved: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201812/self-care-12-ways-take-better-care-yourself>

Book review: *Atomic habits: tiny changes, remarkable results*

By Amanda Palmer, President



According to Jeff Haden, research indicates that 80% of New Year’s Resolutions will be abandoned by February 19th (2020). *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results* by James Clear would assert the reason for this is clear: resolutions focus on the goal, not the system to reach the goal which is a plan for failure. Clear takes the ideas in Charles Duhigg’s *The Power of Habit*, extends them, and adds some of his own ideas to discuss the relationship between habits and identity. Overall, the book provides a thorough two-prong approach to creating positive habits and breaking undesirable habits.

The premise of the book is clear in the title: *Atomic Habits*. The goal is to develop small, immensely powerful (atomic) routines (habits) that will lead to desired changes. The accepted cyclical pattern of habit, as found in *The Power of Habit*, is cue > routine > reward (Duhigg, 2014, p.19). Clear adds a fourth element. He breaks the cue into two parts: Cue and craving, noting that one is the trigger and the other is the motivation. This delineation becomes important as he shares tips to create and break habits.

sense of identity, at least not for long. If a person identifies as a couch potato, they may train for a 5k, but their inner voice is incessantly reminding them they are not a runner. They should be on the couch. People “don’t realize that their old identity can sabotage their new plans for change” (p.32). Clear uses the chapter to provide techniques to slowly shift identity while gaining desirable habits and breaking bad habits. For example, the framing of a goal is critical in shaping your identity. The goal is not to run a 5k, the goal is to *become* a runner. Small, atomic shifts such as this allow a person’s identity to shift with the creation of new habits.

The remainder of the book looks at what Clear calls the “Four Laws of Creating Habits and their Inversions.” Each law and its inversions receives a chapter with suggestions and ideas to assist with putting the law (or inversion) into action.

As an avid self-help reader, I found that this book had valuable tips that I am using in my day-to-day life. It is easy to read and broken into manageable chunks. My entire office has picked it up and is reading it based on word of mouth. It provides easy, step-by-step ways to set up routines and habits that allow you to become the person you imagine.

How to Create a Good Habit	How to Break a Bad Habit
Make it obvious.	Make it invisible.
Make it attractive.	Make it unattractive.
Make it easy.	Make it difficult.
Make it satisfying.	Make it unsatisfying.

The first lesson is to forget about goals and focus on systems. He notes, “Goals are good for setting a direction [like a resolution], but systems are best for making progress” (p. 23). Most people seeking change spend the majority of time focused on creating goals and gloss over *how* they will reach the goals. Clear advocates for putting the most focus on the systems portion of planning, noting that “systems are the processes that lead to results” (p.22).

Chapter 2 focuses on how habits shape our identity. I found this chapter to be the most beneficial. Clear connects our habits to our identities and points out that no matter how much an individual wants a change, they will not do something that contradicts their

References:

Duhigg, C. (2014). *The power of habit: why we do what we do in life and business*. Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Haden, J. (2020, January 3). *A Study of 800 Million Activities Predicts Most New Year’s Resolutions Will Be Abandoned on January 19: How to Create New Habits That Actually Stick*. Inc.com. <https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/a-study-of-800-million-activities-predicts-most-new-years-resolutions-will-be-abandoned-on-january-19-how-you-cancreate-new-habits-that-actually-stick.html>.



Call for Submissions

Review the submission guidelines at https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas.

English in Texas, Vol. 51.1 (Spring/Summer 2021)

Theme: Connections: Crafting Instruction to Discover Joy in Literacy

Manuscript Deadline: April 1, 2021

Column Deadline: April 15, 2021

Call for Submissions: The 2021 conference theme is “Connections: Crafting Instruction to Discover Joy in Literacy.” Our 2020 TCTELA president, Stephen Winton, could not know when he “crafted” the theme for the 2021 TCTELA conference, how much both our personal and our teaching lives would change in 2020. Now, more than ever, we are impelled to discover different ways to create joy in literacy and learning, not only for our students, but for ourselves.

In this issue of *English in Texas*, we want readers to think not only about how teachers of English language arts are “crafting instruction to discover joy in literacy,” but also how, during the tumult in our country and in education in recent months, you have crafted literacy instruction to build connections between the students in your classrooms, working to increase empathy, and celebrate diversity.

As you consider how the “next normal” has changed your classroom instruction and/or your views on the importance of literacy inside and outside the classroom, think about the following questions:

What new connections are you making with students?

As instructional designers, how does your work connect the TEKS while guiding students to form positive social connections?

Are there things we need to “undo?”

When choosing trade books are there certain ones that you have found to be explicit on empathic themes while also allowing students to discover their own learnings?

Writing can be a form of journalistic expression. Are there topics/themes that can be combined within the standards and across all grade levels to discover joy in literacy and in each other?

We welcome you to share your experiences and learnings through articles that are practical, research-based, and/or theoretical, as related to this topic of “Connections: Crafting Instruction to Discover Joy in Literacy.” Please refer to *English in Texas* on the TCTELA website https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas for manuscript submission guidelines. Do not hesitate to contact the editorial team at EnglishinTX@hbu.edu should you have any questions.

Furthermore, we invite interested individuals to submit ideas for our Spring/Summer columns, “Putting It All Together” and “The Tech-Savvy Teacher” as related to the theme of “Connections: Crafting Instruction to Discover Joy in Literacy.” The following descriptions detail each column as well as provide information for contacting the editorial team regarding your column idea. Please query the editorial team BEFORE submitting your full column.

The columns to be published in this issue include:

Putting It All Together: This column focuses on how teachers differentiate for special populations, including gifted/talented, English learners, struggling readers, and other students with special needs. What experiences have you had in integrating reading, writing, listening, and speaking with these populations? What resources have you consulted? What challenges have you faced and how did you address them? To submit a column for publication consideration, please contact the editorial team at EnglishinTX@hbu.edu.

The Tech-Savvy Teacher: This column focuses on ways to incorporate technology into your daily teaching. What are some technology tools you’ve found useful? How do these tools inform your instruction? How do students respond to these tools? What is required to use these tools? To submit a column for publication consideration, please contact the editorial team at EnglishinTX@hbu.edu.

The Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts neither endorses nor opposes political candidates or parties. TCTELA encourages a free and open exchange of ideas. For this reason, the content of conference presentations or articles in *English in Texas* and *Texas Voices* may not necessarily reflect the views of TCTELA or its members.