

Are We Relevant?

Written by Robert Dandoy, President of the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, an NCTE affiliate.

Last summer, I had the privilege of attending the NCTE Leadership Meetings held in New Orleans (2004). The meetings are an opportunity for affiliate leaders from throughout the US to come together to, as stated in the meeting goals, “share our expertise to develop plans of action for our organization[s]”. I have enjoyed attending the meetings in past years and this year was no different, as I returned excited, revitalized, and with a legal pad filled with ideas.

NCTE Vice President, Kyoko Sato, addressed the group and posed a powerful and probing question: Are we relevant? It really wasn't a question that broke new ground, at least for me as President of PCTELA. It is a question we grapple with virtually each time the board meets, when we come together at the state conference, when we have coffee at NCTE, in our e-mails, in our schools. Are we relevant?

What is it that we offer our members? We put a LOT of energy into our conference each year. We talk about newsletters and other publications. We try to develop programs and resources that will facilitate teachers' professional development. But not everyone can come to the conference. My desk is piled high with newsletters and journals from NCTE and the other myriad organizations to which I belong. Do I really need one more thing to read? And, whether because of the shrinking sub pool or just some small-minded thinking, schools are reluctant to allow teachers out of the classroom, even when the professional development opportunity is in their own backyard or on their very doorstep.

Are we relevant?

There I sat at those meetings with educators from all over the country who had come together to discuss these issues, issues they found important and relevant. They had done so at great time and expense. There was obviously something drawing us there. Dr. Sato asked us to consider, “What do you think are the greatest strengths of your organization?” It was through this activity that I began to realize that what is important is not the conference or the programs or the newsletter or ANY of the tangible resources with which we concern ourselves.

Dr. Sato gave us homework, asking us to complete a small project: a brochure delineating these strengths of our organization. It was then that I articulated in this informal homework assignment what I saw PCTELA to be:

- Experienced, talented educators willing to share their diverse knowledge with teachers at any level or years of service.

- Caring, enthusiastic colleagues ready and willing to support you, validate your classroom practice, and celebrate your successes!
- A safe haven for the exchange of your concerns and ideas.
- A network of people and resources upon which you can draw at anytime in addition to this once a year conference that offers a degree of collegiality that may be missing in your professional life

It began to dawn on me that what I was drawing upon in this organization was not THINGS: it was PEOPLE! People upon whom I draw for energy and inspiration. People who contribute to my professional and personal growth. Board members. Conference attendees. Teachers who I only know via e-mail! Friends.

Are we relevant?

We have never been more relevant. In a time when teachers are bombarded and overwhelmed with bureaucracy and bad press, we are needed to remind them of their worth. In a time when teachers are asked to do so many disparate things in our schools and classrooms, we are needed, not as paper capital, but as resources of experience and knowledge. In a time when our pedagogy and methodology is questioned, we are needed to validate. In a time when it all becomes so overwhelming, we are needed to provide a place where ideas are exchanged and our own continued learning is valued.

This is the relevancy of PCTELA and NCTE, far beyond the nuts and bolts of conferences and publications. It is what I have drawn upon over the many years I have been involved in these organizations. It is what gives me the energy to continue. I promise to you, as I continue in my service to this organization, I will work hard to make sure that this continues to be our mission and purpose for you.

Spread the word to colleagues:

WE ARE RELEVANT!