



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF  
TEACHERS OF ENGLISH  
WINTER 2021 | ISSUE 05

# ICTE wishes everyone happy holidays!

## WELCOME

The International Council of Teachers of English (ICTE) brings NCTE international teachers from around the world together, offering support and professional development to further enhance teaching and student learning. Our affiliate draws on a wealth of NCTE support materials and will be expanding this knowledge-set to cater specifically to educators interested in international education.

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on Page 4



**2021 AFFILIATE**  
Newsletter of Excellence Award

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## International Council of Teachers of English

AN NCTE AFFILIATE

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We welcome submissions for our ICTE members stationed around the world! Manuscripts should range in length from 500 to 2,500 words. Please contact us if you would like to submit longer manuscripts. Follow the NCTE guidelines for nonsexist use of language.

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# International Council of Teachers of English honored with 2021 Affiliate Newsletter of Excellence Award

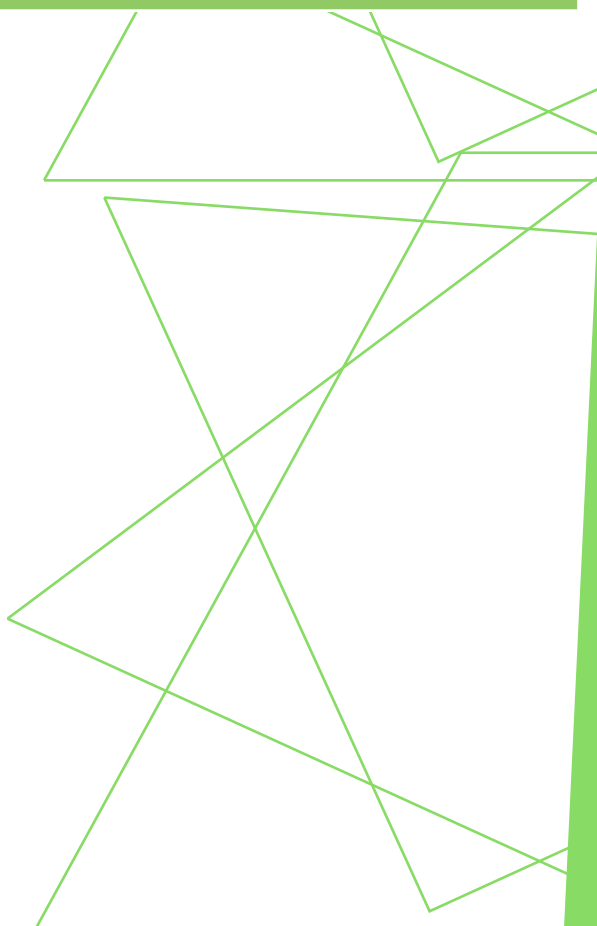
Congratulations to our editors Stacey Wilkins, Stephanie Feo Hughes and Stephen Cooley! ICTE Newsletter just received the NCTE Affiliate Newsletter of Excellence Award given by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

Established in 1992, this award formally recognizes the consistent quality of the newsletters published by the International Council of Teachers of English (ICTE). By honoring outstanding affiliate newsletters and their editors, the NCTE's goal is to encourage excellence in these publications, and the newsletters selected represent models for affiliate newsletters to emulate.

The judges noted that the ICTE Newsletter features excellent presentation and content. Stacey Wilkins said, "I love how this gives me the opportunity to work with English teachers from around the world."

Massive thanks to all our past contributors namely Bogum Yoon, Anne Simpson, Christopher Merrifield, Adrian Tilley, Jessica Lee, Nadia Kalman, Peter Smyth, Ann Neary, Andy Mink, Alice Condé, Allison Finn Yemez, Wayne Furlong, Jessica Gossling, Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion, R. Paul Lege, Robert A. Liftig, Ellen Mangiamale, David McIntrye, Jackie Majerus-Collins, Deirdre Fughey, LeeAnne Lavender, Rebecca Nichols, Nadia Kalman, Tamara Brooks, Olabisi Adenekan, Andrew McNally, Brad Philpot, Chris Shugrue, Eir-Anne Edgar, and Julie Noble.

Special thanks to our layout artist Maria "Tet" Kelly (@kubokreative) who was herself a former teacher of English in the Philippines and is now based in Australia as a freelance graphic designer.



**2021 AFFILIATE**  
Newsletter of Excellence Award

## Post-Colonial India: Midnight's Children and India in the 20th-21st Century

Phillips Academy's Stephanie Curci creates a highly lauded English course centered on a single text

By Sally Holm, *Phillips Academy Andover, Andover, Massachusetts*

Phillips Academy's Stephanie Curci creates a highly lauded English course centered on a single text

Stephanie Curci is waxing enthusiastic about her English 540 students' grasp of Salman Rushdie's seminal, complex, and chaotic novel *Midnight's Children*. (Click here to view the course syllabus <https://bit.ly/CurciSyll1>.) All seniors, they represent by birth or descent far corners of our world — China, Kazakhstan, Japan, the United States, Taiwan, and India — and come at Rushdie's tale of India in all its post-colonial morass from many disparate perspectives.

"The first generation kids in the class — from India but also from other places — think about these issues a lot, or are starting to. It's good for them to see a model that's a sort of cultural vacuum cleaner, taking it all in, instead of having to choose sides — one is either Dominican or American, not both, for instance. One of my kids is partially interested

in the class because his ancestors were on the other side of the 1857 rebellion — they were the Brits in the Siege of Lucknow. So there is something for everyone," Curci explains.

Inspired by a trip to Mumbai with the PA summer service-learning program

Niswarth two years ago, Curci is thrilled to have the opportunity to teach this text, this class. The kids, she adds, "are phenomenal, super impressive." (Curci is no stranger to enthusiasm.)

Rushdie's 1981 novel — the one that put him on the literary map and won many awards, including the Booker Prize — is a rich and troubling feast of magical realism set in the



Stephanie Curci

turbulent birth and unfolding life of India since independence. The author's background — he is Muslim, grew up in India, moved to Pakistan, has an elite English education, writes in English — lends an authentic tangle of perspective and identity to the narrative. It is a story that lays bare the cacophonous fragmentation and confounding history of the emerging southeast Asian subcontinent.

And as if it weren't complicated enough, Curci throws her own diverse perspectives onto the flames. During one class period, she draws literary parallels to *Oedipus Rex*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as her students untangle the multiple meanings of silver spittoons, magical knees, snake poison, and metaphorical chutney. It's a head-spinning experience to sit in on Curci's classes — rich with energy and intellectual rigor, tempered with lots of humor.

Curci's objectives in teaching *Midnight's Children* are obviously many. "I want them to read and understand a text that is challenging and requires other perspectives...a text that is not of my own culture. I hope they leave this class with questions — such as who has power in the narrative? Whose story is being told? What is the envelope? I'm trying to use my own struggle with this work as a model for them. I'm hoping to teach them to be discerning about the author's perspective. I want the considerable difficulty of this work to give them confidence to take on other complex texts. And, of course," she continues, "I want them to learn that country's history while we destabilize the idea of a monolithic India.

**"I want them to read and understand a text that is challenging and requires other perspectives...a text that is not of my own culture."**

*Stephanie Curci*

The novel is post-colonial in its structure and reflection. Rushdie celebrates the extreme hybridity of the Indian culture, and that can only be understood in the context of its history."

On this day, the class is grappling with the last chapter, in which Saleem, the multifaceted narrator of the story, faces his own mortality as he prophesizes his body fracturing into nothing, crushed by the multitudes of Bombay's teeming streets. "Is this a moment of apocalypse or apotheosis? Does he martyr himself so that his story can be known?" Curci asks. One student sees catharsis, another finds promise in Saleem's final understanding of his own mortality. Yet another sees Greek tragedy as Curci draws on South American novelist Gabriel Marquez's fatalistic influence on Rushdie. "Do we know from the start that this character will die? And is this ending Rushdie's prophecy for India — that it will fracture and die? Or a harbinger of hope in Saleem's understanding and transcending his own reality?"

From the end of the table, Edward Molé — a tall, thoughtful boy from Taiwan — speaks up: "I think it's a cinematic ending. It creates a



beautiful finale for the narrator's work of art." Agreeing, Curci has the last word. "Rushdie will always choose artistic truth over reality," she offers, leaving her students with much to ponder as they close their books and trickle out into the New England cold.

### Excerpt from Curci's syllabus:

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was a sensation when it was first published in 1981. Seeming to blend magical realism with a look back at the first 30 years of post-Independence India, it was hailed, particularly by non-Indian readers, as a sort of rebirth of Indian fiction on the world stage. At the same time, many questioned its authenticity as an Indian novel as well as the cosmopolitanism of its world audience; was a book written in English, the colonial language, by a Muslim member of the English-educated elite (whose family then moved to Pakistan) really a representative Indian novel? We'll look at the debate between Rushdie's fans and critics as well as the multiple, complicated worlds of the novel itself. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie shows how politics and post-colonial consequences play out in the domestic sphere and how individuality and hybridity, national identity and personal identity compete in the new India. At the same time, the main character's narrative parallels with the new nation beg us to consider the veracity of the history he presents at the same time that he seems to posit the impossibility of history. Full of mistakes, subjective readings, and allusions to pop culture, this novel is the antithesis of documentary history as we know it.

Using *Midnight's Children* as a central text, the course will consider 20th-/21st-Century India alongside the novel, as well as the debates

and critiques which have grown up alongside this influential work. The reading is reasonable (no more than 100-125 pages of the novel per week) to ensure that we take the time needed for such dense material. In addition to the novel, there is a course packet as well as extensive material online. The novel is divided up into three "books," each of which will require an essay. You can also expect some pop reading quizzes, short in-class writing practice, and a reading journal. In addition to the novel and packet, we will be looking at several films, including "Lagaan," a Bollywood blockbuster that speaks to the novel's questions about cohesion and the "cracking up" of complicated India. This course requires full and enthusiastic participation as well as curiosity and patience as we all grapple with India's history and culture. I hope this can be collaborative, with everyone bringing in knowledge from other courses, readings, and even personal background. One of the course goals is to model how one might approach a text from a culture different from one's own.

*Editor's note: ICTE would like to thank Andover Magazine for granting permission to publish this piece.*

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**Stephanie Curci** is an instructor in English at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where she was chair of the English department from 2015-2021. She teaches across the curriculum, with a special interest in postcolonial literature, graphic novels, and Haitian literature and history. She maintains a website on the Haitian Revolution (created with her colleague, Chris Jones) at [www.mappinghaitianrevolution.com](http://www.mappinghaitianrevolution.com) and a historical visual records project at [www.mappinghaitianhistory.com](http://www.mappinghaitianhistory.com). She can be reached at [scurci@andover.edu](mailto:scurci@andover.edu).

## When Teachers Write



*By Xu Xi, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester,  
Massachusetts*

I've been writing stories and essays since I was a child in Hong Kong of the 1960s under British rule. Back then; it never occurred to me that being "a writer" was a real job. Both my parents were from Central Java, and, after WWII moved to the city where they met and married and raised me and my siblings as "foreign locals." They spoke to us in English, which was the medium of instruction in our local schools and Hong Kong's only official language at the time. But we also became proficient Cantonese speakers because the population was over 97 per cent Cantonese and that was the real language of the people. Meanwhile, my parents spoke Indonesian to each other and it's only now, after they're both deceased, that I've finally begun trying to learn my parents' native language. The short story to all this is that is why and how I became a writer in the English language, because English was the closest I had to a "mother tongue." I did eventually become a real writer, and have

published 14 books of fiction and nonfiction to date, comprising five novels, short story and essay collections plus a memoir. Now, I can't imagine *not* being a writer.

But getting published takes time, as does writing a book, and even a writer must eat. Royalties at 15% of the retail price — sometimes even less for print, but usually more for E Books — really don't put a roof over your head unless you write, say, a novel that becomes an international bestseller or, better yet, gets turned into a blockbuster feature film. Over the years I've always had a



*Photo by: Leslie Lausch*



parallel profession to make a living. For the last two decades, I've taught graduate or post-graduate and undergraduate creative writing internationally, mostly in Asia or U.S. colleges and universities, and directed two international, low-residency MFAs (Master of Fine Arts) in writing. The latter are part-time degree programs that comprise an older student population, a mix of working professionals, stay-at-home parents and homemakers, as well as retirees. These are taught by a combination of brief, intensive "residencies" of classes and workshops, followed by semesters taught by distance where students are paired with a faculty writer. I've also taught writing workshops at schools, universities, writers festivals or other venues, internationally. And the one constant of this peripatetic experience, whether in Greece or Indonesia or Sweden or Singapore or Arizona or Vermont or Connecticut, is that many teachers want to write, are avid readers and do have amazing stories to tell.

There is a tradition of the expatriate writer in English literature. The likes of W. Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene from Britain or Ernest Hemingway and Paul Theroux from the U.S. are just a few well-known examples. The modern day equivalents emerge from a variety of international professions — journalism, diplomacy, business, education,



*Photo by: Paul Hilton*

translation plus other professionals from nonprofits, medicine, law, engineering, architecture, as well as from their "trailing spouses," among others. One observation I can share is that while many have stories to tell from their experiences, it's usually the teachers who are most able to delve deeply into what the country, culture and people are really like. Teaching in local and international secondary and primary schools puts you in especially close contact with ordinary people's lives through your students and their parents. Also, given the popularity of the International Baccalaureate or IB now, many local students attend international schools as well. I've often encouraged the teachers among my graduate students and those in other workshops I lead to draw on this "insider-outsider" perspective abroad for their writing, in addition to writing about their lives or experiences from their countries of origin. International teaching also tends to make good travelers out of people, and travel writing is a natural form of expression. Actually, let me rephrase that: my experience to date corroborates my belief that many expatriate teachers in this

international arena really should be writing their stories. In particular, the longer someone teaches internationally, the more they bring to the table if they're interested enough to pay attention to what happens in their worlds.

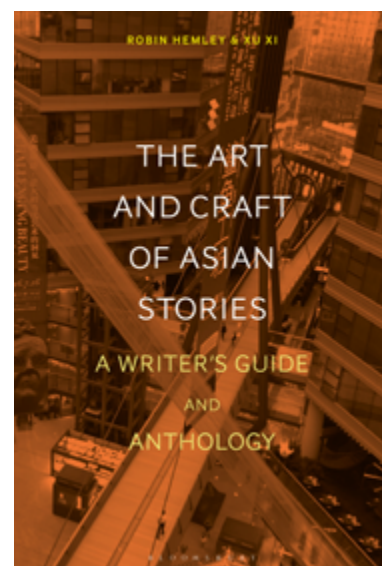
However, teaching creative writing only became my second full-time profession after eighteen-plus years as an international marketing and management executive. I worked for several major multinational corporations and businesses, and my career until 1998 was in Asia and America as a professional in marketing and management. It was partly this experience that led to my forming a business with another writer called [Authors at Large](#) (AAL) that gives would-be writers a space to develop their interest. Through our collective of authors, we offer international and also online writing retreats and workshops for writers at all levels, as well as custom design programs and workshops for a large enough group. Our clients become part of an international community of like-minded individuals who want to write and who also understand what it's like to live and work around the world. We also offer individual manuscript consultations with authors from our collective for mostly those who are working on a book-length manuscript; for such clients we usually do require a writing sample.

For anyone who is interested in writing creatively, however, my first advice is always the same: just start writing. Keep a journal to make notes of what you observe, as well as what you may be reading, and start a regular writing practice to try to make stories, poems or essays which either read as individual pieces or could become chapters or part of a longer work. This appears self-evident, but it always surprises me how often people belabor the idea of wanting to become a writer when all

someone really needs to do to become one is to write. Obviously, it helps to read a lot, and based on what you most love to read, you can begin to decide what it is you want to write. The most important decision any writer makes about a new piece of work is to know what kind of work they're trying to write. One thing I have discovered in the many years I've been a writer is that the blank page always looks the same. It's only by filling the blank that it becomes something you want to say as a piece of writing.

While I do recommend low-residency MFAs for those who seriously wish to study creative writing, it is a major commitment, even as a part-time degree program, and there are generally few scholarships offered. The alternative is to give up your job and study full time at one of the many residential MFAs, but for older working professionals, you are likely to be in the minority, age-wise. Some residential MFAs often do offer full or partial funding, but those that do are also extremely competitive to get into, especially in fiction, which is the most popular genre of study. Applicants can submit a double digit number of applications only to be rejected by all. For that reason, I usually advise working professionals not to give up their careers and to apply to low-residency programs instead, where the acceptance rate is less unforgiving and where you can study and continue to work, due to the distance learning model.

Meanwhile, for someone with no previous training or background in creative writing, a



better place to start is to look for an English language writing community in the closest city. For those who live and work in more remote areas, there are plenty of online groups as well. Usually, it is possible to participate in writing workshops with such groups where you share work and offer commentary and feedback to each other. Many are free or only charge a nominal subscription fee. Likewise, there are courses at colleges or universities, writers' conferences or festivals, bookstores, libraries, arts centers or associations that you can attend. In the summer, when many international teachers can take their holidays, there are often workshops offered over a weekend or longer to enroll in at many universities that have creative writing programs. I have taught workshops in a variety of such programs and venues and invariably there are bound to be teachers among most groups. Teaching, by its very nature of imparting knowledge to others, is a profession that seems compatible with writing.

When teachers write creatively, the results can be inspiring. Personally, as a teacher myself, I hope to read more novels, memoirs, poetry and more from the international teaching community.

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**XU XI 許素細** is Indonesian-Chinese, born and raised in Hong Kong. An author of fourteen books of fiction and nonfiction, she is considered one of Hong Kong's leading writers in English. Recent titles include *This Fish is Fowl: Essays of Being* (2019), *Insignificance: Hong Kong Stories* (2018), *Dear Hong Kong: An Elegy for A City* (2017) and the novel *That Man in Our Lives* (2016). She is also editor of four anthologies of Hong Kong writing in English and most recently, Bloomsbury released *The Art and Craft of Asian Stories: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* (October 2021) which she co-authored with Robin Hemley. Forthcoming is *Monkey in Residence & Other Speculations* (S8Puk, 2023). She is co-founder of Authors at Large and, most recently established the Mongrel Writers Residence™ as a hideaway for "mongrel" writers like herself. She currently occupies the [William H.P. Jenks Chair in Contemporary Letters](#) at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. A diehard transnational, she has long split her life between the state of New York and the rest of the world. Follow her @ [xuxiwriter](#) at Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. She can be reached at [xuxi@mc.com](mailto:xuxi@mc.com).

## Learning to Grow and Thrive Within a Hegemonic Community to Impact Praxis: The Case of Two West African Women in American Classrooms



By Dr. Olabisi Adenekan, Oakton College, Des Plaines, Illinois and Dr. Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion, Elgin Community College, Elgin, Illinois.

**Editor's Note:** *This story is the first part of a two-part series written by Dr Adenekan and Dr. Gyimah-Concepcion. We will feature the second installment in our spring newsletter.*

We are made for communities (Christie et al., 2007; Sergiovanni, 1994; Wenger, 2011; Wenger et al., 2005). Human beings build and live in communities for subsistence and growth, to learn survival strategies, and for the promotion of the essence of what we need to be quintessentially human (McKenzie, 1924). Consequently, alienation and exclusion are familiar feelings for people who have been transplanted to another community (Adenekan, 2020; Elbaz-Luwisch\*, 2007). They quickly realise the necessity to build a community to survive, blend, and possibly, recreate a renewed identity within the homogeneous community (Hale, 2004; Hogg, 2000; Mullin & Hogg, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

As women of Nigerian and British/Ghanaian heritage, our identity as Black immigrant women scholars, K-12 classroom teachers and college professors teaching American students in the U.S. has shaped our learning and instruction (Esnard et al., 2019). After relocating to the United States, the necessity to create a community to express ourselves, present our ideas, to know, and be known became apparent. We re-discovered a shared identity that is uniquely ours in the way we think and express our perceptions, and in how our nuanced cultural identities reflect in our practices and research.

We observed similarities in our perception and understanding of issues because of our similar cultural backgrounds, but these notions were often difficult to convey to others. We discovered that we share “the sub-culture of immigrants that’s kind of unspoken” (Adenekan, 2019, p. 2), often, without

comparing notes, we mutually understand our collective experiences and thoughts.

Furthermore, because our cultural identities as African women are subsumed in the general American cultural identity, we sometimes struggle with: (1) owning our identity and sharing it with our students, and the academic spaces we inhabit; (2) merging said identity with this new American identity we are coming into; and (3) finding an authenticity that is truly ours in our expressions as educators in American classrooms. As educators and researchers, we are re-learning how to grow and thrive with and in the professional community of American educators.

### **Context: Telling a Piece of our Story**

**Olabisi:** I grew up in the era of tales by moonlight. I remember my father, sitting in his “African La-Z-Boy” while we sat in circles on the floor around him, listening to folktales, stories, songs, and family history. I remember the comforting aroma of my mother’s cooking on the open fire intermingled with the sound and music of crickets and insects in the background, punctuated by our

choral responses to the folksongs. I therefore naturally operate from this oral storytelling positioning in my teaching and pedagogy. Almost by default, my mind goes to some songs, folktales, proverbs, or African sayings as I try to explicate a concept in class. I used to hesitate to do this because of the hassle of providing the needed background knowledge to make my explanation understandable, but I realise that the power of literacy inherently lies in its ability to open up such vistas that my students may not otherwise have known as I share such literacy practices from far-flung geographies.

**Mellissa:** My mum and dad were born and raised in Ghana before emigrating to Germany, then to the UK, where I was born. I was not seen as fully British, or Ghanaian. As an English teacher in the U.K. (Dover, Kent) in a predominantly white school, my Blackness was always brought up. The students were less concerned with me being Ghanaian than with being Black, born in London, and teaching in Dover. They positioned me towards them as the cool Black teacher with a London accent. When I got to the U.S., the same thing occurred — people were less concerned about me being Ghanaian than with being a Black person with a British accent. Thus, the issue of not “belonging” was further magnified. I have come to realise that I occupy many spaces — some I understand, and some I am still discovering and learning to adapt to — I am an immigrant wherever I go. This part of my identity will always affect my experiences, my teaching, and my research. Thus, I tell students stories of my upbringing and experiences as a Black teen growing up in East London since this humanises me and others who look and sound like me.

**I realise that the power of literacy inherently lies in its ability to open up such vistas that my students may not otherwise have known as I share such literacy practices from far-flung geographies.**

*Dr. Olabisi Adenekan*

## Storytelling and Communities Within Communities

We frame this work with communities of practice (Wenger, 2011; Wenger et al., 2002) and the concept of storytelling (Baker-Bell, 2017; Maracle, 1990) because we both immediately formulated a community (within the wider community) as educators and practitioners in American classrooms. We draw on Lee Maracle's (1990) assertion that "there is a story in every line of theory... [and] if theory cannot be shown, it cannot be understood" (p. 7). We define storytelling in this piece as an act of discussing past and present experiences to learn from each other, support one another, and understand what works with our students when we share about our cultural background to propel the learning forward. We found that telling our personal stories was a very useful pedagogical tool in advancing the literacy learning of our students, in helping them understand their positions in society, and in making local and global connections. This telling of stories was also needed for us to humanise ourselves in a space that felt foreign to us in how to be and act, as:

Only humans tell stories. Story sets us apart. For humans, story is like gravity: a field of force that surrounds us and influences all of our movements. But, like gravity, story is so omnipresent that we are hardly aware of how it shapes our lives. (Gottschall, 2012, p. 1)

We are two Black immigrants teaching predominantly White students, in departments made up of mostly White colleagues. Although we get along well with our colleagues and students, we struggle to fully be ourselves. We, therefore, built our community-of-two up as we shared stories and realised that we had and are going

through similar experiences — experiences our colleagues had not navigated, or could not conceive. Community-wise, we felt safe sharing our ideas and learning with each other as we knew our cultural backgrounds were similar and many of our lived experiences resonated. We also had the commonality of outsiders feeling out of place, mostly due to students often questioning our identity — where we were from because of our accents and our "hard-to-pronounce" names.

**Between us, we created this sub-community of practice, as we found that this is probably what happens if your vision and plans do not align with the hegemonic one.**

*Dr. Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion*

With our practices, we found that our stories in this space as literacy educators became a "shared repertoire for [our] practice" (Wenger, 2011, p. 2). Through these stories, we built a friendship, and essentially a shared practice, as we discussed how to navigate recurrent problems in our classrooms, or in our students' narrow understanding of the world, and typically, about our cultural backgrounds. Between us, we created this sub-community of practice, as we found that this is probably what happens if your vision and plans do not align with the hegemonic one. For example:

The very qualities that make a community an ideal structure for learning – a



shared perspectives on a domain, trust, a communal identity, long-standing relationships, an established practice – are the same qualities that can hold it hostage to its history and its achievements. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 141)

This is what Wenger et al. (2002) described as a downside of communities of practice, and this is often what we experience in spaces that do not look like us.

Building our community through telling our stories validates and affirms our cultural and teacher identities as Black immigrant educators in predominantly White American classrooms. The building of relationships and community also reinforces our need to tell our truths through our storytelling, and gives us permission to not fit in, but to take up spaces as we are, thereby encouraging the cultivation of adaptation in the spaces we inhabit and encounter.

## Implications

Through our intentional partnership, we draw on each other's unique perspectives and lived experiences to become more reflexive and reflective educators and researchers, both locally and globally.

Implications of this collective storying of identities in our work demonstrate the need and practices of collaboration as we seek advancement in both teaching and research in the fields of English and literacy. Additionally, exploring the intersectionalities of Black immigrant literacy educators' language practices and identities can be a powerful tool in repositioning Black immigrant teachers in the classroom and within conversations about the nuances of Blackness as Black immigrant

women in the U.S. It is also a tool for enacting change when it comes to the lack of discussion around Black immigrant identities, and the African Diaspora writ large. We will be asking our students to move past what they think they already know about Blackness, to encompass a much broader, critical tapestry of identity, new vistas, and territories. This, in effect, should enrich students' learning experiences, developing their critical consciousness and global perspectives.

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**Dr. Olabisi Kehinde Adenekan** is a college professor, educational researcher, learning behavior specialist, an expert in literacy instruction, and trainer with three decades of experience in higher education, both locally and internationally. Often describing herself as the epitome of diversity, Dr. Adenekan has the positioning and freedom to straddle many worlds. She is passionate about literacy instruction, language acquisition, and use, cultural responsiveness, minority empowerment, advocacy, and educational equity matters. She can be reached at [adenekan@oakton.edu](mailto:adenekan@oakton.edu).

**Dr. Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion** is an Assistant Professor of English at Elgin Community College. She was born and raised in the UK to Ghanaian parents and has lived in the U.S. for 9 years. Her global experiences and background imbues her with a love and passion for understanding and honouring people's lived experiences. Her research interests include dialogic literacy experiences, critical literacy, African immigrant pedagogies, and positioning theory. She can be reached at [mgyimah-concepci@elgin.edu](mailto:mgyimah-concepci@elgin.edu).

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## Moving Towards New Transcultural Practices



*By Joanna Moe, Education Development Institute, Qatar*

As a leader of educator professional learning, working in international contexts, a problem of practice that continues to surface in my roles, is how educators from a range of backgrounds, cultures, languages, teaching experiences and training can work together to effectively share and learn from their collective professional knowledge. Through an intentionally disruptive learning design, we attempted to address this challenge.

### **My context**

I work for the Education Development Institute (EDI), which provides bilingual, Arabic and English, pre-K – grade 12, professional learning support for educators predominantly in Qatar. As a learning organization, we are committed to equity and bilingual ways of working. Due to our context, we have intentionally recruited education trainers globally to ensure

diversity within the team. The assumption has been that by collaborating in designing professional learning, the variety of thinking will result in a culmination of best practices from international settings. While there are examples of this diversity bringing about innovative designs, it has been an ongoing challenge for our team, coming from such diverse educational contexts, cultures and languages to find ‘common’ ground and mutual understanding that is needed to present coherent professional learning offerings to educators.

Our diversity means that I am one of the few leaders who cannot communicate in Arabic. I have team members who range from being able to operate in English or Arabic only, with a number of individuals working across a continuum of bilingual and biliterate proficiency. This coupled with the educational curriculums and theorists that we refer to,

have created a situation where English has become our default. Language doesn't stand alone in this scenario. The intersection of culture, history and the socio-political system in our context creates a situation where the social capital that circulates, tends to value and reinforce Western ways of working, specifically English as a lingua franca and the beliefs around what constitutes best practice in teaching and learning. This skews whose knowledge is valued and considered, and whose knowledge is silenced. Fricker (2017) in her work on epistemic injustice within socially situated spaces, claims that this injustice happens at both a testimonial level, when a 'hearer' discredits a speaker in their role of 'knower' and at a hermeneutical level, when a speaker is at a disadvantage due to a gap in their collective hermeneutical capital, which results in them participating "unequally in practices through which social meanings are generated" (p.6). As a leadership team we recognized that this was happening in our context. My focus of practice became, how to work towards addressing these injustices. In collaboration with other leaders, we designed a program of professional learning for our team that attempted to redress areas of epistemic injustice using the framework of Collaborative Professionalism. To assess the impact of this design, I surveyed our team at the end of the process to capture their reflections. I also interviewed an English speaker, an Arabic speaker, and a bilingual speaker to get their representative perspective on what impact the design had had on their own learning and their role as a professional learning practitioner.

### **Starting with Collaborative Professionalism**

Hargreaves and O'Conner (2018) developed a framework for educators to work intentionally, and rigorously to improve collaborative practice. Their framework sets out ten tenets that educator teams should use to design quality and provide rigorous consistency into their collaborative practices.

**For our team to achieve common meaning and purpose and collective efficacy, I was specifically interested in the areas of joint work and mutual dialogue as they each hold professional dialogue as a key component.**

For our team to achieve common meaning and purpose and collective efficacy, I was specifically interested in the areas of joint work and mutual dialogue as they each hold professional dialogue as a key component. Joint work is described as collaborating in ways where individuals 'labor together'. This joint work involves multiple individuals connected in work that is of value and bigger than themselves. This occurs through thoughtful and intentional examination of practices and usually requires protocols and artifacts. Mutual dialogue involves 'talk as the work'. "Difficult conversations can be had and are actively instigated where they are justified.

Feedback is honest. (Hargreaves & O'Conner 2018, p.114)"

Within our team, high quality professional discussions are encouraged. We use inclusive practices such as bilingual agendas, intentional shifting into Arabic to summarize points, translation of written texts that we are engaging with such as PowerPoints and readings, opportunities for questions in either language, and while we have been working remotely, visible thinking tools that can cater to both languages.

While these practices afford spaces for Arabic speaking colleagues' voice, much of these discussions remained at the surface level. 'Laboring' together and having difficult conversations is challenging when the cultural and linguistic diversity within a team means that individuals may not share a language, have the same conceptual understandings or conversational tools such as turn-taking or have read the same educational thought leaders.

**An intentional disruptive design was created where individuals would choose which language they wanted to learn in, engage in discussions, and read in, initially in pairs and trios.**

### **Disruptive Design for Epistemic Justice**

As we came out of a long period of working remotely, there was a need to reset our

shared understandings. Our leadership team decided to focus on our underlying learning principles (Well-being, Inquiry, Agency, Multimodal Communication and Reflection) as an area of professional learning for our team over a three-month period. We created an intentional disruptive design, where individuals would choose which language they wanted to use to read about and discuss one of the learning principles, initially in pairs and trios. They would then present their shared understanding of the learning principle to the other groups working in the same language. Once all groups had presented, the 'principle' teams from each language met and shared their understanding. They then presented their shared understanding to the larger group in a bilingual workshop.

The theory of change in the design was allowing people to learn collaboratively in the language they felt most comfortable in, before coming together as a multilingual group, would allow for faster and deeper understanding, where "discussion develops the back-and-forth quality of genuine dialogue, of valued differences of opinion about ideas" (Hargreaves & O'Conner 2018, p.114). This design was utilized to allow everyone's voice to contribute, to build a strong consensus as well as provide opportunities for engaging in and with others' diverse conceptual thinking. The process resulted a shared understanding in both languages on what the principles were and how they would be implemented in our practices. Given the focus of practice I had set for myself, I was interested in whether we had achieved the goal of engaging in mutual dialogue and joint work. Team members completed surveys and interviews upon completion of the professional learning program. Based on the collective responses, the collaborative learning process utilized

was successful. The disruptive learning design on the surface appears to have been successful in providing access to learning for all members and space for contributions from everyone across language groups. Several team members raised questions about whether the learning had built cross-language understanding or if learning had continued to occur in silos, where people 'labored together' in their own language group. One interviewee questioned "when are the times to work together bilingually when are the times to work together in your, your [own] language" (Ruby, 13 June 2021).

### Implications

An aspirational outcome of this work, was to create a learning design that moved our team towards 'new transcultural discursive practices' (Lai, Zhen & Gong 2016) Although the disruptive learning design began to shift thinking and understanding across the team, even when the individuals did not speak the same language, it also highlighted areas that can be explored further, such as understanding how to leverage our boundary spanning bilingual team members, in the pursuit of my linguistically diverse, cross-cultural team to work together in genuinely inclusive, meaningful and equitable ways to effectively share and learn from their collective professional knowledge.

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## Teacher Reflection and the Intersections of Racism and LGBTQ+ Issues



By Stephanie Anne Shelton, *The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama* and Tamara Brooks, *Escola Americana de Belo Horizonte, Belo Horizonte, Brazil*

We have been in education long enough to see trends come and go across multiple countries and continents, and to see educators push for lasting, meaningful change, each having taught for approximately 20 years, primarily as high school English language arts teachers. And we've worked to be a part of those shifts while realizing that to achieve meaningful change, we have to turn our attention inward; forward progress has to start with honest examinations of who we are as teachers. An important shift that we have noted is how recent social and political events around the globe have pushed schools to explicitly examine, and sometimes prohibit, topics of racism in curricula and policies ("Anti-Racist"). Simultaneously, we, and other educators, grapple with how best to support LGBTQ+ students in school spaces (Human). Both efforts are necessary, powerful, and potentially life-saving efforts that are not trends; they are essential to

everyday teaching. However, the two aims are regularly separated—as if racialized and anti-LGBTQ+ prejudices do not intersect, and as if LGBTQ+ Students of Color do not have multifaceted needs. To silo racism as separate from issues such as cisgenderism (systems of oppression that enforce traditional and expected gender norms (Lennon and Mistler)) and heterosexism (systems of oppression against non-heterosexual people ("What")) is to erase racialized LGBTQ+ identities. As we were considering the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender in schooling and in our own classrooms, Tamara noted, "Lots of teachers are thinking, 'I know that these problems exist, but what do I *do* about them? How can I help?'"

We do not pretend to have all the answers, and we readily acknowledge varying degrees of teacher agency in various contexts but understanding and addressing racialized

identities as intersecting with LGBTQ+ identities is inextricably part of what being a teacher requires. Here, we focus on an element of teaching that every educator has some power in shaping, regardless of resources, context, or experience level: ourselves.

### Painful Epiphany and Teacher Reflection

**Tamara:** A relatively new teacher in a basement-level classroom, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and realized that one student was passing a note to another. Walking by the recipient's desk, I inwardly gasped as I read the paper: "Ms. Brooks is a flaming conservative." Denials immediately flooded my brain and almost my lips. I hadn't said anything political, hadn't introduced anything controversial, was just going about the daily work of teaching them English. What were they talking about? How could they know? Furthermore, why did they care? I didn't know.

Having been friends for almost 15 years and teachers for even longer, each time that we recall and share moments like this one, a common refrain is, "I didn't know." The not-knowing is what brings us to the internal, reflective work that *all* teachers can engage in, no matter where or who they are. We have both heard teachers offer advice like, "Meet the kids where they are," but the point here is to meet *you* where *you* are.

As part of this reflection, we have pondered and invite you to contemplate these questions:

- What do I need to consider about myself, particularly unconscious or implicit biases, that might shape my interactions with and decisions for students?
- What assumptions am I making about who students are because of who I am? And who they aren't because their experiences haven't been my experiences?
- What language am I using that categorizes students in unintentionally problematic ways?
- What items in my classroom assert norms that might exclude students?
- What identities am I separating, when students' experiences and identities might be intersected?
- How might my social justice efforts be duplicating exclusion rather than challenging it?

Teachers are already open to judgement and censure due to the nature of our profession, so to ask educators to examine themselves intrinsically seems another level of possible criticism and rebuke. Yet, this is the work that must be done to overcome the often-hidden inequities in our classrooms, which exist simply because we teachers are human. This reflective work requires levels of vulnerability that we often ask of students but not always of ourselves: to reflect on our beliefs about the intersections of people—especially students—and all that we carry into the classroom, often unconsciously.

That baggage sometimes becomes a burden for marginalized students, as our best intentions ignore or erase their multifaceted identities and needs. Our goal is not to teacher-blame but to encourage careful considerations of how that baggage matters in how, what, and who we teach. We would emphasize that these reflections are often difficult and uncomfortable, but without this internal work, there cannot be meaningful and effective external work to examine racism and LGBTQ+ topics as real, intersecting, and daily aspects of students' and our lives. This reflective self-examining work is necessary and possible, for all teachers, in all contexts.

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## Job Spotlight

# It is a Marathon and not a Sprint



*By Peter Smyth, Search Associates, Surrey, United Kingdom*

For many the end is in sight. The end of semester one that is! Many teachers will also be in the position where they have informed their current school of their intentions to stay on in their current position or leave at the end of the academic year.

This time is an exciting and very scary one for teachers. There are six months of limbo where teachers are currently working in a position, but have not yet secured another position for the following school year. And so my attention turns to recruitment and securing a job for next year.

Previously I talked about ensuring all your professional materials were in order: CV, philosophy statement, background checks, portfolio of work and references. (See "And we are off", ICTE Fall 2021 newsletter) This information remains pertinent, but in a highly competitive market how do you ensure that a recruiter/head of school/HR manager moves

you into the 'maybe/research more' pile rather than the 'no' pile.

I was listening to and talking with heads of school recently and it is clear that an applicant's cover letter is key — it must be good. Assuming you have the qualifications, experience needed to apply, meet all the visa requirements and a myriad of other needs, it is your cover letter that will get you over the first hurdle. The cover letter is important to bear in mind when there could be hundreds of applicants for the English teaching position you seek.

The most common complaint I hear from heads of school and HR managers is that an applicant has not addressed the role for which they are applying. They merely send a well-crafted condensed summary of their CV. Recruiters want to know that you understand the role you are applying for, that you are aware of the school's needs, community, and

any other unique features it might have. If you are applying for a position that is a step up from what you are currently doing you must clearly articulate why you feel you are ready to take on that position.

### How do you write a great cover letter?

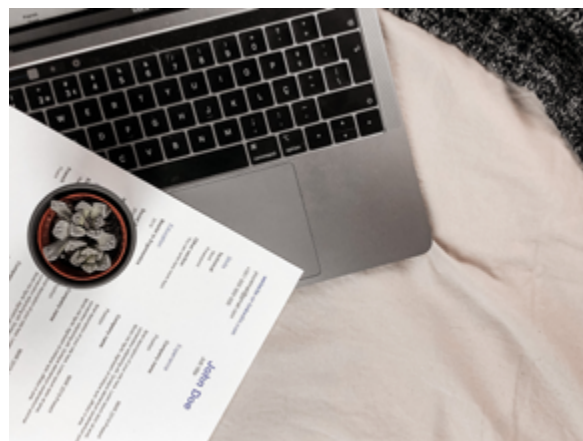
Research the school and if the position has a job description (JD) be sure to read it and understand how your experiences meet that JD. For some positions there might be extremely specific requirements and if you do not meet them then spending time writing a letter may well be useless. Be sure to address the key points and use terminology from the JD in your cover letter that will be familiar to the person that is the first point of contact.

Be honest, and if you do not have experiences that they require, that is ok, but clearly explain how you believe your current experiences make up for it.

## Focus your letter on what you can personally contribute to the school rather than what the school can do for you.

Focus your letter on what you can personally contribute to the school rather than what the school can do for you.

Your cover letter should catch their eye and make them want to learn more about you. Write the cover letter in a way that invites the recruiter to want to contact you straight away. You must make it so that they would be crazy to pass you by.



Have a trusted friend read your letter and critique it. Address it to the correct person and school (you would be amazed at how many letters get this simple step wrong). A good cover letter should be tailored differently for each and every school to which you apply. Admittedly, this is time consuming and challenging work but the unemployed alternative is not a great scenario either. In an increasingly competitive market you want to stand out among the many, many application emails that schools receive every day from English teacher applicants all over the world.

And lastly, in an ever changing, competitive, and unpredictable recruitment landscape: patience is key. The recruiting season now is far longer than ever before with schools continuing to hire and fill vacancies in a job season that now extends to the end of the school year.

Nowadays, finding a new job is certainly more of a marathon than a sprint.

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## 21st Century Literacies and Employability



*By Christopher Merrifield, Palladium Management Consulting,  
Southampton, United Kingdom*

Globally, it is often stated that certain key skills among graduates, from mandatory school leavers to education graduates, are often lacking in the areas of transferable skills, communication, languages, digital literacy and learnability.

However, in my recent teaching experience, while graduates are career hunting, I have found that being disenfranchised, underselling one's self and being somewhat "locked out" of right paying, right fit careers is less obvious than previously imagined.

From a schooling standpoint why is it so difficult for our graduates to find work or advance their positions? The unfortunate truth is the Common Core in the United States and the Key States in the United Kingdom do not create proficient job hunters with up to date interview skills.

As such the desirable candidate is unlikely to ever find meaningful employment. For the aspiring school or college graduate and their families, increasingly high fees and news of graduates facing diminishing returns makes the fate of the graduate look increasingly grim. These realities are especially true for teaching/education careers where the balance of academic prowess and personal qualities are what make great role models (Goggin, Sheridan, Lárusdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir 2019; Granjard, 2021; Merrifield, 2020).

### **Real Cost of 21st Century Literacies Not Including Job Application Skills**

There is an increasing population that is resentful of educated people (which we are witnessing now) along with the consequence that less value is being added to the economy due to higher rates of unemployment.



The consequence of this is that those suffering mid-career, mid-life, post pandemic crisis find that their experiences are synonymous with burnout. On reflection it is not unreasonable to assume this rut is evidentially the result of job application skills not being instilled into students or their teachers at high school or university respectively.

For many graduates this situation creates a life of being perpetually undervalued or at least unable to promote their transferable skills in turbulent times. There are few popular outlets that allow job seekers to access these kinds of skills, and those that do are generally commercial venues such as Indeed, Reed, Monster and especially LinkedIn. Such companies should be praised for promoting their training videos on modern day job-hunting skills. It is indeed perplexing that job-hunting and job-winning abilities are not part of mandatory education given that they are core life skills (Renzulli, 2019; Rolfe, n.d; Smith & Smalley, 2018; Sunak, 2021).

As graduates struggle to find work, what will the long-term costs to the economy and teaching industry be? The Institute of Employability Professionals in the United Kingdom and the OECD both highlight the need for training around an ageing population without proficient job-hunting skills. They also note the lack of proficient recruitment professionals.

Although things were very different 40 years ago, it is perplexing that the British government is not more engaged in addressing issues such as: poor skills in CV writing and online job hunting; lack of awareness of the Applicant Tracking System (ATS); lack of self reflection and self gratitude; and few opportunities for continual professional development (CPD) and personal development.



This bundle of abilities is what I refer to as “job hunter literacies”. Intangible career skills such as self-gratitude are very important, and the lack of such skills are sources of 21st century burnout in the fields of education, medicine, public service and Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) careers, which are critical sectors in industrialized countries.

To avoid burnout, job hunter literacies should be added to the curriculum in mandatory schooling years, at the college and university levels, and as part of continuing professional development. These core skills should be perceived as life skills that, along with other life skills, will indefinitely benefit the individual, corporate world, and the larger society, contributing to economic growth and development. The specific skills that should be taught are as follows.

### **21st Century Resume Writing**

Currently, while some job search sites and free courses exist out there, it is often confusing to know what information is correct. We can relate this to two areas: firstly, the stylistic variances between nations; secondly, the plethora of older and newer resume / CV templates. Courses therefore need to cover how the ATS function works at a pseudo- logic level, as well as variations between countries which impact the usefulness of jargon, the interpretation of spelling, and the ability to interpret formatting.

For job seekers that are skilled trades people and have careers, these variations to the common rule need to be addressed appropriately at each level. Some colleges in the United States, such as Excelsior College, offer cover letter and resume writing services; however, this may not guarantee a thorough understanding, nor support people with other aspects of their career progression (Gagua, 2015).



### Video Resume Skills And Virtual Interview Skills

Many job-winning activities are mixed in nature and these can be as varied as the differences between using Microsoft Teams versus Zoom. Although we may feel that there are plenty of video guides and the social-media-savvy younger generations (especially education/teaching graduates looking at careers involving e-learning or blended learning careers) are more than confident that the realities of social media are no different than face-to-face interviews, having confidence and technical competence on social media does not mean that job applicants will be confident and competent in a formal interview.

Equally, it is necessary to educate job hunters about how to create video resumes/interviews and how emergent artificial intelligent scanners will be used in the future. Job seekers may also struggle with how to match the specifications for their desired characteristics when they are required to send a video that they record. Given the continuing merging of language skills, artificial intelligence screening, and visual communication, specific training by accredited sources is certainly needed as this will be a source of disenfranchisement fuelling burnout in the future (Oxford, n.d).

### The Future

In the 21st century, the integrated processes of gaining a job driven by the international job market and technology will likely fuel burnout at all career levels as specific training needs to be implemented in mandatory schooling and across one's life. Without 21st century job training, the loss of diverse economic needs, and technology-driven mental health issues such as burnout, will continue to increase this hidden pandemic as the issues above become part of the ongoing digital divide. The current trend is a specific threat to the education industry as burnout will continue to deprive students of valuable role models and mentors. It is especially disturbing this is the case, given that with the few modifications to training highlighted above, it is, for the most part, easily avoidable (Mollinari, 2011).

**Editor's Note:** *The definition of 'burnout' in this article is based on Merrifield's 3Ms definition of Misconception (misalignment of self concept, perceptive orientation and emotional identity) Maladaptation (driven by Misconception an inability to select, combine or create effectively survival or coping resources) and Mishandling*

(caused by Misconception and Maladaptation an inability to filter or measure effective sources of information adding to conceptual conflict or confusion). (CAB, 2021, OECD, 2021, Merrifield, 2020).

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