

Chalkboard

Chalkboard is the newsletter of the Oregon Council of Teachers of English, an organization that has existed for over 100 years to support the teacher of English and the language arts in Oregon elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.

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I write with the highest hopes that our members have weathered the storm that has been this spring term at our schools, in our country, and in the nation at large. Perhaps we have used some of these fraught times to read more for our own interest; I finally managed to read *Anna Karenina*, a lifelong goal. Or perhaps we've spent our time on a steep learning curve, using Zoom and Google Classrooms to a degree never before with our students. Perhaps the last few weeks in particular have pointed you to revisit and recommit to what you and your school do for students of color and to nurture a community where all learners are loved and safe. Perhaps you have logged in more Netflix binging hours than you would care to admit. Perhaps you have

suffered illness, fear, or the loss of a loved one. Wherever you have been, I welcome you here, today, with a message that says that we cannot afford to lose hope, for we are beacons of possibility to the young people we work with. On behalf of OCTE, hello, welcome to spring, and may we all see some brighter days ahead. Reach out to any of your fellow teachers or OCTE members for support, resources, and the knowledge that we are all in this together.

Courtney Palmer 2019 NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence Award Winner
Grant High School, Portland Public School District

Introduction by Laurie Dougherty

Courtney Palmer received the NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence Award in Baltimore, Maryland this past November. In recommending Courtney, colleague Maurice Phillips, had the following to say about her, “In the classroom she is probably one of our most successful teachers that we have connecting with students from underserved populations. She recognizes that students come from all walks of life, so she makes sure that she meets them where they are, invites them into her classroom, and connects them to the curriculum in a way that is valid and relevant to their lives.”

Since November, we have experienced unprecedented changes in how we teach, bringing new challenges for connecting with students. We invited Courtney to share some of her thoughts about building a sense of community in the distance learning environment.



Courtney writes:

The thing that struck me first was our complete lack of true data on our students. Yes, we had tagged the “historically underserved” -- as districts do -- but had very little insight into anything other than that particular statistic. Food insecurity? Time and space to attempt learning at home? Employment obligations? Childcare? Access to technology? We had to start from scratch. For my small part, I started with what I knew: Direct family/guardian/student communication.

Throughout my brief, five year career, I’ve relied heavily on communication to ground my relationships with students and their families and guardians. My relationships with others is how I move through the world, and, come to find out, how I move through teaching, too. Generally this comes from face-to-face interactions -- the kind that is centered around things OTHER than schoolwork and grading -- that allow me to build a connection based in our shared humanity. Eye contact, body language, pacing, expressions all help me cobble together an understanding of how to best build that all-important rapport. It helps to demonstrate that, maybe, I’m not that terrifying. In practice, it leads to increased engagement and trust for *all* my students. Great for regular times. Not so great for COVID-19’s version of education. What had been my strength essentially evaporated. I needed help.

I’ve always been the teacher that works in isolation, head down, focused on my students and classes. Collaboration was just a buzzword floating around our stilted PLC work. This feature that I place immense importance upon my classrooms just wasn’t an attribute of professional life. Until now. What had been a relatively siloed approach -- each teacher functioning as a warehouse of information apart from anyone else -- came to a screeching halt in the face of all this uncertainty. We needed each other. Across disciplines, grades, interests...we needed each other.

Together, in this bizarre world of screens, slide decks, and distance, we’ve built a network to help each individual educator find community, strategy, and finally connection. With support from my colleagues, I found pathways to reach every student. Slowly at first, but then with sustained regularity, students -- historically underserved as well as historically overserved, to borrow a phrase from my fellow English teacher -- began attending virtual meetings. We talked. Scrapped traditional lessons for a team-built time capsule project across all Junior classes, where all students found purpose. Played virtual Jeopardy to review the year’s lessons. Had a scavenger hunt to get us up and moving. Played BINGO to keep track of assignments and gamify this time. Maybe the most important, students began showing up for 1:1 meetings just to talk.

None of these activities hopped, fully formed, from my brain. Nothing I’ve done during this time has been in isolation. Community has fundamentally changed my teaching and, more importantly, how I learn along with my students. The result? Participation -- via video, email,

phone discussion, text -- from 100% of my 168 students. Those whom I can't reach have had sustained contact from other educators and counselors throughout the building as these artificially constructed barriers between departments and grade levels come down. So I ask: What artifices can we let fall as we push forward into what will surely be a new phase in education?

**Book Review: *We Set the Dark on Fire*, by Tehlor Mejia
Sylvie Stokes, 8th-grade, Ashbrook Independent School, Corvallis, OR**

I was scrolling through the home page on Cloud Library one day, not paying much attention, when a book jumped out at me that I had never noticed before. The book was *We Set The Dark On Fire* by Tehlor Kay Mejia, and it is now one of my favorites, because the instant I started reading it, I fell into the world Mejia created. I began on an adventure I didn't expect at all, learning of corruption of the political system in the fictional country of Medio, that bled over into the real world around me. The system of government in the book is very male-led, with rich and important men taking charge while being advised by their wives. The people outside the walls of Medio, however, are seen as less than human and illegal, and if they manage to sneak inside the walls, are looked down upon and likely thrown out or killed unless they manage to keep their origins a secret.

Soon after I read Majia's novel, in 8th-grade English class we read *The Handmaid's Tale*, and I noticed quite a few things in common between the two. For example, women were trained for their role to their husband in a similar way in both books, and men had more than one wife who was assigned to them. I would definitely recommend Mejia's book to students who are interested in reading about a corrupt political system and two strong women who find their way outside of it, and any teacher who is looking for a progressive story that is fun to read and easy to become absorbed in. The themes explored throughout the novel, such as heteronormativity in complex political systems, and the habit people have of seeing other groups as inferior, as well as the depth of the characters and world that Mejia had created, left me looking forward to the sequel, *We Unleash the Merciless Storm*. That was even better than the first! I'm excited for when I can read more of Mejia's writing, and I would be surprised if anyone who reads her doesn't feel the same way.

OCTE Fall Conference 2020 is going Virtual - Sudi Stodola



Hello, My name is Sudi and I am a webinar junkie. While nothing can replace the rich conversations and valuable connections that come from attending conferences in person where I am surrounded by others in my profession, I love being able to attend PD by watching a recorded webinar while in my pajamas on Saturday morning while the house is quiet and the kids are still asleep. I also love virtual conferences - a format which often affords me the opportunity to attend every session I wanted to. Even the ones that were scheduled for the same time slot!

In the wake of the Distance Learning crash course we experienced this spring, the OCTE Fall Conference committee is going to use everything we learned to create an online format for our members this year. Going online gives us the opportunity to offer live presentations as well as recorded ones so our members can join us live but have the opportunity to view some of our offerings at a later time, when they are able.

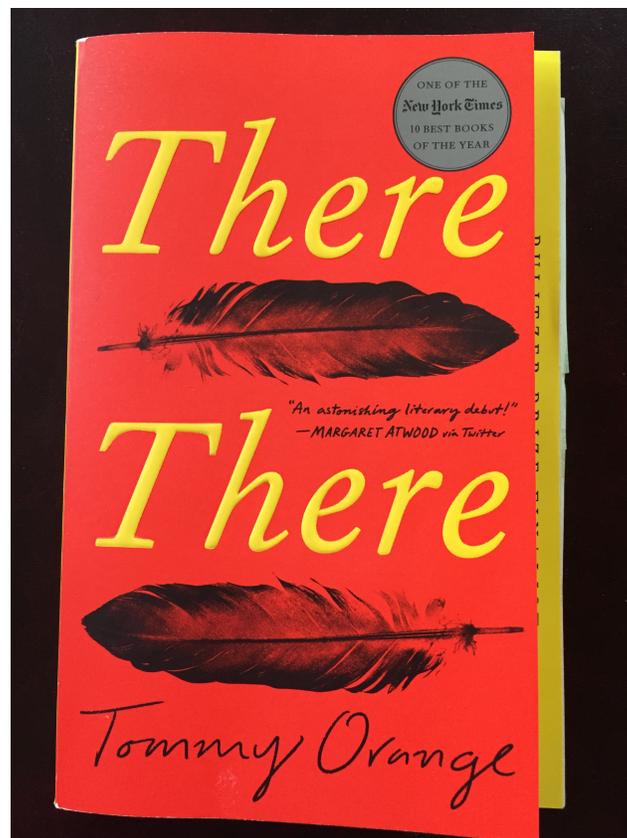
We are exploring platforms for this online option, from something as simple as a Google Doc with links to recordings and resources, to using a dedicated platform, and everything in between. We are sharing examples from virtual conferences we have attended and we are

considering the needs of teachers as we still don't know what K-12 education will look like this fall.

It is our hope that this format will be appreciated by our members and will attract more attendees, as they will not have to calculate drive time, mileage, or hotel costs in order to reap the benefits of attending an OCTE conference. Time will tell whether this approach is successful, but I have a good feeling. I hope to see you online!

Call for proposals: <https://bit.ly/OCTE2020>

Summer Book Club



School is almost over for the year. Join us in June to recharge your batteries and connect with peers. Our summer book club is here just for you!

Join the OCTE community of readers in a private Facebook Group to explore Pulitzer Prize Nominee Tommy Orange's novel *There There*.

“Every book begins and ends with other people- the readers who suggest the book to us and encourage us to read it, the talented author who crafted each word, the fascinating individuals we meet inside the pages- and the readers we discuss and share the book with when we finish.”

— Donalyn Miller, *Reading in the Wild*

Join the OCTE community of readers to explore Tommy Orange's novel *There There*. Orange inspired his audience at the 2019 NCTE Convention in Baltimore and shared his writer's journey and the unlikeliness of his speaking to us as a published author and Pulitzer prize nominee. Laurie Dougherty and Trish Emerson were there and captivated. He made the book come alive for us and as moderators of this private Facebook discussion group, we want to share that experience with YOU!

There There weaves the powerful stories of American Indian characters as they converge in Oakland, California's urban landscape for a pow-wow, indigenous people that have gone mostly unnoticed—until now. Tommy compels us to travel with them, to connect with their lives.



Trish Emerson with Tommy Orange, at Baltimore NCTE, 2019

OCTE Reads 2020 invites everyone who is interested to explore the “fascinating individuals we meet inside these pages,” to see where our community collaboration takes us, a journey for us and by us. Participants will join together to respond, question, and wonder. Along the way, we’ll find resources that enrich our shared experience.

[Join us here](#)

OCTE Teacher Grants, spring 2020

OCTE offers annual grants to assist teachers in the classroom. Grants of \$150 - \$300 are available to develop curriculum, purchase materials, or otherwise enhance instruction in language arts/literacy. This year, our grant committee was pleased to be able to award three teachers with classroom grants. The hope is that they will be able to implement their ideas this fall in their classrooms and share some results with us. Grant submissions are due Feb. 15. Please consider applying yourself!

Annee Blevins: Teacher Librarian, The Dalles High School, The Dalles, OR

Annee Blevins, a teacher-librarian, will collaborate with a classroom ELA teacher to support choice reading in literature circles. In the article, Literature Circles 2.0: Updating a Classic Strategy for the 21st Century, Herrera and Kidwell summarize years of research on the value of literature circles. Research has shown that literature circles benefit students with disabilities, promote self-determination, develop reading enthusiasm, and expose students to diverse texts and perspectives. High-quality collaboration benefits teachers and students, researchers found that this

type of collaboration has been shown to not only increase the teacher's performance but also increases student achievement.

Annee writes: "It has been said that books act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Through reading students can look into a window at unknown worlds. They can get a view of places that are vastly different than where they live. These places can be real or imagined. Students can also see bits of themselves in the characters that they read about. This helps them to feel less alone and builds a global community. Additionally, readers can walk into the experiences of others within the pages of a book, building empathy for things outside their reality. Because of the immense power of young adult literature, we want to expose the students of Dallas to more diverse books. Dallas High School has slowly been updating curriculum to include more current and relevant classroom novels."

"All of the reading done in the new Modern Literature class will be self-selected novels; however, one of the units will require students to choose a title from pre-determined literature sets. The titles for these literature sets will be high-interest newly published texts. Consideration is being given to titles that have won awards that promote social justice issues. In the literature circles students will have the opportunity to talk about their values, listen to each other, and understand the plight of under-represented communities. The money from this grant will be used to purchase some of these literature sets."

Dan Jones, 7th-grade Language Arts teacher, J.W. Poynter Middle School, Hillsboro, OR



The NCTE Statement on Classroom Libraries succinctly summarizes the importance of well-funded and carefully curated libraries. Since becoming a teacher in 2015, my principal and ELA department have provided me with modest funds each year to spend on classroom library books. While appreciated, this has been insufficient to meet the diverse needs and shifting literary interests of 150+ students per year.

I try to stock my classroom library with books that provide for my students "windows, mirrors, and doors." I want all learners to feel affirmed by the

material in our classroom library. And the more global literature I can provide to my diverse groups of learners, the more empathetic they may become. Reading books teaches us about humanity; learning about humanity makes us want to help others.

My plan is to use the awarded funds to purchase from used book sales 100-150 gently-used high-quality, high-interest classroom library books in order to promote independent reading as a lifelong habit. In the short term, I hope to see more of my 7th graders choose to read for learning and pleasure. I will use classroom library checkout records to reveal patterns of checkouts before and after the purchase of OCTE-funded classroom library books.

**Valerie Schiller, Teacher of Language Arts 10 & 11; Coach, Speech & Debate Team
Reynolds High School, Troutdale, OR**



My project seeks to bring a greater quantity and quality of literature into my high school Language Arts classroom. I currently have six (6) total fiction and non-fiction books available on my shelf for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). At my extraordinarily diverse school of nearly 3,000 students, many have not yet fallen in love with reading. It is a challenge for my students to find books of interest; some struggle to connect with a book's characters. This grant money will help me fill my classroom's book shelves with diverse authors and characters who speak to my students' unique racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.