The following is the text of Yvonne Siu-Runyan’s presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois, on November 20, 2011.

E komo mai (welcome) and aloha. The word aloha literally means “with breath.” And so, on this momentous occasion—a ho’olaulea (celebration)—I share my breath with you.

As I prepared my presidential address, I felt a responsibility to honor the NCTE kupunas (elders) and kumus (teachers) who have helped us and who continue to stand by our sides on our journeys as educators. Without them we would not be where we are today, 100 years after our inception at the place of origin, Chicago, Illinois, celebrating the centennial birthday of the National Council of Teachers of English. During this 100-year journey, NCTE, born out of a group of advocates, has mattered for students, teachers, and parents.
So, *ho'olu komo* (please join) and *hele mei ho'ohiwahiwa* (come celebrate) our treasured elders and teachers who paved the path for us. In February 2008, a group of us wrote this modern chant at Kaupoa, Moloka‘i, Hawai‘i in honor of our elders and teachers.

**Mele Aloha No Kaupoa—An Aloha Chant for Kaupoa**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hawaiian</th>
<th>English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He aloha ke-ia no Kaupoa</td>
<td>This is our expression of aloha for Kaupoa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapuana i ka makani ho'onu'a</td>
<td>Carried upon the swelling breeze</td>
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<tr>
<td>A he nu'a 'aumakua i ka pō Kāne</td>
<td>And there’s a multitude of ancestors on the night of Kane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I walea nō i ke kani ho'okumu</td>
<td>That we’re enjoying the sound of creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O nā kumu kukui mālama mala</td>
<td>Of the teachers who provide such brilliant guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malama aka o nā noa 'ímí 'ike</td>
<td>Nurturing the spirit of the friends seeking knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ua 'ikea—he aloha no Kaupoa e</td>
<td>It is apparent, the aloha for Kaupoa</td>
</tr>
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For this talk, I chose the title “Telling Our Stories,” or as they say in Hawaiian, *Ka Ha‘i Mo‘olelo ‘Ana*, which literally translated means “The Telling of Stories,” because stories define us and are fundamental to the formation of our identities. Another benefit of stories is that they cross all the boundaries—boundaries of time, culture, language, and geography.

So, why are stories so powerful, and how do stories define us? The power of narrative can change people’s deeply entrenched views of reality and help them accept and understand the naked truth, even if this naked truth is not easy to hear. The following poem, “Naked Truth and Parable” (Forest, 1996), describes this:

**Naked Truth and Parable**

Naked Truth walked down the street one day.
People turned their eyes away.
Parable arrived, draped in decoration.
People greeted Parable with celebration.
Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired,  
“Why are you so miserable?” Parable inquired.  
Naked Truth replied, “I’m not welcome anymore.  
No one wants to see me. They chase me from their door.”  
“It is hard to look at Naked Truth,” Parable explained.  
“Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained.”  
Parable dressed Naked Truth in story’s fine attire,  
with metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.  
With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,  
together they went forth to spin a tale.  
People opened their doors and served them their best.  
Naked Truth dressed in story was a welcome guest.  

―Heather Forest  

“Naked Truth and Parable,” a poem by Heather Forest, is based on a tale told by the Maggid of Dubno, an 18th-century Eastern European rabbi. © Heather Forest 1996. From *Wisdom Tales from around the World*, August House Publishers, Atlanta, GA.

Now is the time we must tell our stories of naked truth. But what kind of stories should we tell?  
We can tell stories about what is happening to schools, teachers, and students. Here is Lea’s story, one that shows how the No Child Left Behind Act has left her school and its students behind.

We found out yesterday that our school will be in Year 2 of Program Improvement because the scores of one subgroup declined 0.2%. Every other subgroup made gains and our API increased by several points, but it wasn’t enough to freeze us in Year 1. Our staff is depressed and demoralized and that’s without considering the costs of the gains we made, i.e., cutting the amount of art, science, music, and social studies the students receive. This is educational malpractice.

**Poverty: The Elephant in the Room**  
Lea’s story leads me to the next point. Which children usually have better opportunities to learn? Right—it’s those who come from families where there is a living wage, health and dental care, nutritious food, and, as we know, access to books.

What can teachers learn from children who live in poverty? Here is Beth’s story. She is a first-grade teacher.

I made a mistake once I’ll never make again. I asked my class to draw their bedroom for homework, including the furniture. We were about to begin a unit on nonstandard measure. A few kids said they slept in the living room. I said, “Okay. Draw the living room.” One ESL boy (who moved often and had very limited English) drew a rectangle amidst the couch, table, and TV. I asked, “Oh, is that your bed?”
He said, “No. It’s my carpet.”
I said, “Do you mean mattress?”
He said (scathingly, as if speaking to an idiot), “I know a mattress and I know a carpet.
I sleep on a carpet. When it gets dirty, I shake it.”
He moved again just a few weeks later.

Poverty and Education

It has been said by the ill-advised that in this country we need to educate our students out of poverty. This notion puts the cart before the horse. We must first address poverty in order to educate our students. The effects of poverty are daunting—low birth weight, lack of nutritious food, lack of health and dental care, living in toxic environments, and lack of access to books. As Albert Einstein wrote (cited in Berliner, 2006): “All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.” People cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps if they don’t have boots. Berliner (2006) argues that as a society we have to consider out-of-school factors and their effects on learning.

Valerie Strauss (2011) reports, “With nearly 22 percent of the nation’s children living in poverty, and with school reformers insisting that the effects of living in poverty can be overcome by schools without actually dealing with those effects—sickness, hunger, no early education, etc.—the gap will remain. It’s not rocket science.”

And in his last book, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968/2010) states, “We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished” (p. 173). “The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. . . . The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty” (p. 175).

The Generosity and Love of Teachers

Now I turn to my father’s story, one of triumph over poverty, which is steeped in courage, persistence, gratitude, and humility. I share this story with you because it was his teachers who made the difference in my papa’s life when he was young. He didn’t have any bootstraps or boots. It was the teachers who fed and loved my father at a crucial time in his life. Here’s a peek into my papa’s young days.

From his infancy to primary years in school, my father grew up on the now defunct Waialua Sugar Cane Plantation in Waialua, O‘ahu, where his father, my grandfather, was luna (overseer). Because he was the youngest child of many, when his father and then shortly after that his mother died, my father was sent to foster care. The foster care situation was not a good one—he wasn’t fed and was mistreated. My father was a hungry child and needed someone to look after him. Well, as it turns out, my papa’s teachers would bring food for him to eat; they collected
extra food from the other children who didn’t finish their lunches and gave it to my papa. My father loved his teachers; they were his salvation. Thank you, papa, for passing on your profound love of teachers to me. Your reminders that my job is to improve the next generation were not lost on me, and for that I am grateful.

Teachers, I ask, How many children have we clothed and fed and even purchased school supplies for? Let’s tell stories of how we help families and children in need.

Let us also embrace the idea of primum nil nocere, “First, do no harm.”

And let us tell stories of those who had the persistence and determination to finish high school in the face of odds, like my father, who graduated from high school the same year as I—1963. People like my father are heroes, not failures. Let’s celebrate them and their accomplishments. Let’s bring them into the literacy club to help us inspire our young to reach beyond their wildest dreams and make a positive difference.

**It’s Never Too Late to Go to School**

Susan relates this story about her father:

During the Great Depression, my father had to work, and so he didn’t go to school regularly. He graduated from high school in 1930 when he was 21 years old. His job was digging graves in a cemetery in Los Angeles.

Later, in the early ’30s, after he did earn his high school degree, he still worked for the LA mortuary. The employees were given a chit for lunch at a nearby restaurant. He told me he’d give his chit—worth 35 cents—to someone he saw begging in the street and eat lunch with him. “I wanted to hear their stories, hear what was happening to them,” he’d tell us.

It always impressed me that he thought peoples’ stories were so important. And that’s what we need now: people listening to teachers’ stories as well the children’s stories.

Yes, we do need people to listen to the teachers’ stories as well as those of our students. When I told Marissa that I wanted her to tell teachers what is important to her, this is what she wrote. She writes from the perspective of a sophomore in high school.

Trying to be the perfect high-school student is stressful. I never imagined that attending high school would be as difficult as it is in terms of my emotional well-being. There is a lot of pressure from not only parents, but also from teachers and even peers.

Well, I am only a sophomore in high school and I am not perfect. In fact, no one is perfect. The last thing any student needs is one more thing to be perfect at.

Something happened that opened up my eyes. This concerns a close friend of mine who lost one of her close friends who committed suicide, because of all the pressures she faced.
When someone my age kills herself over the pressures from school and home, this is a travesty. I have vowed not to do that to myself. I mean, when someone my age kills herself after being pushed to a breaking point, nothing will change my mind about the nonsense of spending time to do my best on those mind-numbing tests.

As you can tell, Marissa rebels against the carrot-and-stick model, the punitive one being used in schools across this country.

Daniel Pink’s research shows that while carrots and sticks worked successfully in the twentieth century, they are precisely the wrong way to motivate people for challenges we face today, such as climate change, high unemployment, wars, overpopulation, and how we use technology to harm or advance. In his book *Drive*, Pink (2010) examines the three elements of true motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. In a YouTube animation (TheRSAorg, 2010), Pink’s message is that money motivates only when the task is rudimentary and basic needs are not met. Once basic needs are met, the secret to high performance and satisfaction at work, at school, and at home is the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and our world.

**The Value of Free Voluntary Reading**

How can we cultivate autonomy, mastery, and purpose in our classrooms? One way, a sure way, is for students to have access to a plethora of books—fiction and nonfiction—and time to engage in free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2011).

One of my former first-grade students chose to read the book, *The History of Mankind*, a fourth-grade textbook. When I asked him why he was reading *The History of Mankind*, D. J. looked at me quizzically as though I were an idiot for even asking this question, then responded, “Because I am interested in the history of mankind.”

Surprised that he would tackle such a difficult book, I asked, “But isn’t this book a bit hard for you?”

“Yes,” he responded, “but I need to read this book, because I am interested in the history of mankind.”

“But what do you do when you come across a word you don’t know?” I probed, wondering what he would say.

He sighed and responded, “Sometimes I skip the word. Other times I read around the word. I also put in words that make sense. I even try to sound out the words. And then sometimes I just ask someone what the word is.”

“Wouldn’t you like to read something easier?” I asked, giving him a way out.

“Nope,” he answered, “I am going to read this book until I am finished with it. Then if you like, you can read it and learn about the history of mankind.”

For D. J., reading was enjoyable, and if he wanted to read a book, nothing would deter him. He had drive—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—and, of course, access to books.
By the way, D. J. finished this book when he was in the third grade.

Having access to books is powerful in so many ways. Access to books can mitigate some of the effects of poverty. In fact, having access to books is most important if we want our young people to be readers, writers, and thinkers. Let’s make the time for this to happen and encourage our students to self-select books and engage in free voluntary reading.

Remember this poem by Emily Dickinson (1924)?

He ate and drank the precious Words
His Spirit grew robust;
He knew no more that he was poor,
Nor that his frame was Dust.
He danced along the dingy Days,
And this Bequest of Wings
Was but a Book — what Liberty
A loosened spirit brings!

But how many others don’t have access to books? How many others do not have the opportunity to learn how to read because of their condition?

What can we learn from people like Janet Driskell Turner, a sharecropper’s daughter who learned to read as a great-grandmother through the Boulder Reads! Program at the Boulder Library? She wrote her first book, *Through the Back Door*, in 2001. I had the pleasure of knowing Janet and thus of interviewing her about her journey as a great-grandmother learning how to read and write. This is a portion of our conversation (Siu-Runyan, 2002).

**YSR:** What did your tutors do to help you?

**JDT:** They always seemed to know what I needed, like what book to read, what places to go to and explore today. They treated me with respect and love. And they encouraged me, didn’t make me feel like a failure. They were patient. I didn’t feel like a nobody, I felt like a somebody. I never felt stupid in this program. Nobody ever feels stupid in this program. We never had to pass a test, which would have threatened me.

**YSR:** Oh, so you weren’t given a test, to pass?

**JDT:** No I just learned and I had support whenever I needed it.

**YSR:** If you were to give advice, what would you say to three groups of people, young kids in school, adults who would like to learn how to read, and the teachers who teach the children and the adults. First, let’s start with the younger children. What would you say to them?

**JDT:** I would tell the young people that they should get into a club, like a reading club and just read, even if you’re on vacation or just relaxing. You need to know how to read for everything, to go out and eat, to get your
driver’s license. So, don’t wait till you’re old, do it while you’re young. And tell people that you have a mind of your own.

YSR: What would you say to an adult who wants to learn?

JDT: I would tell them not to sit around like I did. Do it for yourself and nobody else. And be good to yourself. And, don’t start something and not finish it. It’s a waste of your time. So, if you start something, finish it.

YSR: And what would you say to the teachers?

JDT: Care about your students. If you care about them, then they will care about themselves. Don’t be so quick to judge a child. Don’t close the door to the child; always keep the door open to a child.

Always Keep the Door Open

So how do we as teachers not close doors to our children but always keep them open?

At Norman North High School in Oklahoma, Claudia Swisher teaches a Reading for Pleasure class. When students read for pleasure, selecting books they enjoy, wonderful things happen. Here is an unsolicited letter to Claudia from one of her students.

Dear Mrs. Swish!

This is Chaz Farris and i just took a little trip down memory lane, pretty good place to be if i do say so myself. I just looked back and read my lots and gallery entry for the first time. Lately i haven’t been doing so great and i found some stuff i wrote in your class where i had turned the pain of my grandfather passing away into literature. I found in your class it was so easy to find myself and express myself not only in writing but being able to relate to the words in the pages i read in your class. The things i was able to do and write have already started to help me in my future. For example i totally aced my reading part of my english e.o.i. and final. I wanted to say thank you for allowing me to be in your class, making me ready for a brighter future and being the greatest teacher i have ever had. Your spirit and your knowledge are super inspiring to everyone you are around. I want you to know i am signing up for your class every year i have left at Norman North High School. Have an amazing summer and never ever retire. ~Chaz.

And here’s another one of Claudia’s students. Jake wrote the following:

R4P has maybe not fed my mind as much as my soul. You see my mother is a full-blown rehabilitating alcoholic. That has made the past four years of my life Hell. Now she may be recovering but the damage done to me hasn’t yet been attended to, but R4P has remedied that. Having read books such as Tuesdays with Morrie, has really opened my eyes on how to live. I know it sounds farfetched but really this class has taught me how to be happy again.

When I wrote to Claudia and asked her about this class, she explained:
I invented this [course] out of my own love of reading, my library science and reading specialist backgrounds. I knew this would work. . . . I flat-out trust kids to find books they love and to read them. Funny things happen when you trust kids . . . they never let you down.

You are right, Claudia; when we trust kids, they never let us down.

And when we try to mold them into versions of ourselves, they often rebel. We don’t need more people who are the same. In a global society, we need people who can invent jobs and create things—qualities that high-stakes tests can never measure. The world of the future will not be the same. The only constant is change. Thus, in order to help our young people learn to live in an ever-changing world, perhaps we need to consider Educating for Human Greatness (Stoddard, 2011). Here are the seven qualities of human greatness as outlined by Stoddard.

1. Identity: The power of self-worth derived from developing one’s unique talents and gifts and using them to benefit society.
2. Inquiry: The power of curiosity and effective investigation.
3. Interaction: The powers of love, human relationships, communication, and cooperation.
5. Imagination: The power of creativity in its many forms, including innovative problem solving. The arts and other disciplines are used to nurture and expand all forms of imagination and creativity.
6. Intuition: The power of the heart to sense truth and develop emotional intelligence.
7. Integrity: The power of honesty and responsibility.

These most important attributes cannot easily be measured by high-stakes tests.

Einstein supposedly had a sign hanging on his door at Princeton that read, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” We need to remember that our children are not coloring books. We don’t get to choose the colors or draw the lines for them. Here is an example from Tracy, a mother and a teacher. Her story shows that no matter how hard we try, we cannot make our young people into what we want them to be.

Tonight I planned with my 22-year-old son about his move to North Carolina to work for a company you all would know if I shared its name.

My son has a high school diploma that he earned by barely squeaking by. He spent more time figuring out how little he could do to pass with a 70 than he did to get an A.

Most of his time in high school, outside of class, he taught himself how to program computers. It’s his passion, and he’s amazing at it. I took his computer away every other semester because he was failing his classes at school.
My fear was that he wouldn’t “play the game” and then not be able to navigate the system we have today.

My own situation makes me realize how we are failing our children in this country with the system we have.

I feel so defeated that our system fails so many students because we don’t figure out their strengths then help them find out how they can serve our world.

My kid did it by sheer strength of will, fighting even his parents’ attempts to mold him. His abilities today are sought after, because he defied us. He is a work in progress, no doubt, but who he is today is in spite of the education system, not because of it. And for that I feel ashamed to be a teacher who follows the rules.

The Importance of Engagement

When our students are engaged in real issues and given opportunities to study and find ways to get involved in solving these problems, astonishing things happen. On the island of Moloka‘i, Hawai‘i, a group of environmental education scientists conducted a study about children’s awareness of environmental issues (Cheak, Volk, & Hungerford, 2002). The researchers chose Moloka‘i because of its setting—easy access to nature, a small population, and a high percentage of low-income families.

A member of the Moloka‘i community discusses the program’s importance:

It’s not just the project in school to get a grade. Because they bring it out into the community. I’ve seen these kids attend annual public hearings and give testimony about the issues—like water uses or use of land—based on their public surveys. They’re talking to the government officials. And that’s a hard thing to do, you know. These are little elementary school kids giving testimony, which is more factual than what adults were saying. . . . It’s very impressive.

One teacher explains why this environmental education project is so impressive:

We just lost so much. The educational system in Hawaii has become so standardized and based on things that come from the mainland that don’t work with our children. The kids can’t relate to the topics that are written about. So, environmental education gives people a lot of options to connect kids to the environment. This brings in science and language arts and art and music. The Hawaiian culture was [and is] very much based on the environment, so you can’t really separate environmental education and cultural education.

What’s My Point?

My point is that telling our stories is one of the most important things we can do for those we teach as well as for our profession.

Through telling our stories, we inform others about the “ins and outs” of our jobs and what they entail. Teaching is not for the faint of heart. Teaching involves
having a heart filled with love and steadfastness in addition to a good dose of believing in the capacity of our students and ourselves.

By telling our stories, we can change the way others perceive what we do as well as explain the intricacies of our profession, for we must. We must counter the tales that blame the ills of society on teachers. Thus, we must tell our stories far and wide.

Here are a few stories that we can tell, which have the power of changing past and current perceptions of what we do. We can tell:

1. How teachers must orchestrate an ever-changing classroom environment and at the same time meet the needs of our students, each with their unique personalities, interests, and abilities.
2. How high-stakes testing affects how students view themselves and whether or not they like going to school and learning.
3. The ways in which we work with parents, family members, and guardians, counseling them about how they can support their children’s learning.
4. How reading books can change the way our students see the world and what they learn from reading.
5. Why stories are important and how stories make isolated facts understandable and real.

Listen to this piece, “The Guessing Sound Game,” by Travis, who was in the first grade when he wrote it. He recorded his observations for a science unit and then used his notes to write this narrative.

The Guessing Sound Game
by Travis
What goes SWISH, SWISH?
The wind.
What goes CRUNCH, CRUNCH?
The Leaves.
What goes RRR, RRR?
The Chainsaw.
What goes BZZ, BZZ?
A Hummingbird.
What goes SH, SH?
The Creek.
What goes BANG, BANG?
A Hammer.
What goes HEE HEE?
You do.
The end, I think.
Isn’t this an amazing piece for a first grader to write? It is understandable, engaging, reflective, and musical—and all indicative of higher-order thinking. When I asked Travis why he ended with, “The end, I think,” his matter-of-fact response, “Because I don’t know if this piece is finished,” told me that he understands revision—revision in thoughts, in actions, and in the things he writes. He knows that like the pieces he composes, he too is a work in progress, as we all are.

We teachers have a responsibility to share stories like these, our stories. We need to provide the public with our perspectives on education because we are the professionals and we live our profession every day. As Bill Moyers (2011) said, “While it is important to cover the news, it is more important to uncover the news.”

So, let’s be valiant—as our founders were—and use our beloved 100-year-old NCTE, the new National Center for Literacy Education, and NCTE’s Connected Community for telling our stories. When we tell our stories, we release ourselves from the shackles of mandates and broaden our own and the public’s perspective of the value of what we do.

We must tell our stories, for telling our stories is telling the truth: Our children are more than test scores. Our children are not for profit.

Remember the power you have as a teacher—the power of a smile, a touch, a look, an encouraging word. Through telling our stories, we collectively are telling the truth—a powerful accomplishment, because story is the most powerful way to get an idea across. We need to tell our stories for the sake of our children, our profession, this country, and its future. We are teachers and we touch the future and we are in this for the long haul, not the quarterly report.

I challenge you. I implore you. Go forth and tell your stories far and wide.

Believe me, telling your stories will not be for naught. You all matter, because teaching is a calling not just a job—as we all know.

Be the spark, and your students will burn brightly.

As it is said in Hawai‘i, Let’s talk story!

I see you.

REFERENCES


Christmas dawn hnaih ni 4 vel la awmin vawiin hi hmelma te bomb tura ka thlawh chhuah hmasak ber tum ani a ka zauthau hle mai. Order kan hmuh angin Germany hmar lam a an aircraft leh ammunition factory te va bomb tur kan ni a B17F Flying fortress bomber engemaw zat kan thlawk chhuak a, ka thlawhna hi Ye Ol The 2012 NCTE Presidential Address: Literacy, Rhetoric, Education, Democracy. Keith Gilyard The Pennsylvania State University. The following is the text of Keith Gilyards presidential address, delivered at the NCTE Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, on November 18, 2012. Listen, baby. Muver love you. This is the promise of democratic education, which is the catalyst to enable our nation to make the most of its collective life, something it cannot do without an ever-expanding critical discourse. Pundits these days are fond of talking about how someone is doubling-down on some idea or another. I have not been using the clich, but in Las Vegas I feel compelled.