



The New England Association
of Teachers of English
in partnership with
The Connecticut Council of
Teachers of English



presents its

123rd Annual Conference

Brave Spaces, Safe Spaces

Keynote Speaker
Matt Hongoltz-Hetling

Eastern Connecticut State University
Willimantic, CT
October 25, 2025

Brave Spaces, Safe Spaces

NEATE and CTCTE are thrilled to welcome teachers, scholars, and students at all levels of education to the **123rd Annual Conference** held on the campus of Connecticut's only public liberal arts institution, **Eastern CT State University**. Together, we will deepen our pedagogical practices while we honor the emotional and intellectual landscapes we navigate in our classrooms every day.

This year's theme, **"Brave Spaces, Safe Spaces,"** invites us to reflect on the dual responsibility we carry as educators: to foster environments where students feel secure enough to be themselves, and courageous enough to challenge ideas, take risks, and grow. In English classrooms—where language, literature, and identity intersect—this balance is especially vital. As philosopher and educator Paulo Freire once said, **"Education does not change the world. Education changes people: people change the world."**

Throughout the conference, you will engage with sessions that explore:

- Literature as a tool for empathy, resistance, and transformation
- Inclusive teaching strategies that honor diverse voices
- How to cultivate classroom cultures that support both safety and bravery
- The role of vulnerability in learning and leading
- And many others!

We hope this space becomes a brave one for you—to ask questions, share stories, and challenge norms—and a safe one, where your experiences and insights are respected and valued. Thank you for the work you do every day to empower learners through language.

Warmly,

Dr. Mark Fabrizi

NEATE Conference Chair



Keynote Speaker

Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling, award-winning international journalist and author of *A Libertarian Walks into a Bear*, *If It Sounds Like a Quack...*, and *The Ghost Lab*, is lauded for his compelling narrative features and fearless investigative reporting. He was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting and recipient of the prestigious 2011 George Polk Award for Local Reporting. He has earned national recognition for exposing systemic failures in housing oversight and for his deep dives into rural American life. His writing blends humor, insight, and investigative rigor, making complex issues accessible and engaging.

Conference Schedule Overview

8:00 AM – 11:45 AM	Registration (Lobby)
8:00 AM – 9:00 AM	Breakfast (Betty Tipton Room—BTR)
9:00 AM – 9:45 AM	NEATE Affiliate Meeting (Room 107)—all are welcome!
9:00 AM – 11:45 AM	Morning Sessions Author Book Readings and Q-and-A (Student Theatre) Vendors and Exhibits (BTR)
11:45 AM – 12:30 PM	Lunch and Award Presentations (BTR)
12:30 PM – 1:30 PM	Keynote Speaker: Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling (BTR)
1:30 PM – 3:00 PM	Author Tabletalks, Vendors, and Exhibits (BTR) Poet-of-the-Year Readings (Student Theatre)
1:30 PM – 4:30 PM	Afternoon Sessions
4:30 PM – 5:00 PM	Closing Remarks (BTR)

Author Readings, Q-and-A, and Book Signings

NEATE and CTCTE are proud to welcome the following authors who will read from their works and participate in a Q-and-A in the Student Theatre (Sessions I & II), and will be available to talk with conference-goers and sign copies of their books in the Betty Tipton Room during Session III.

Daniel Ravipinto and **Neil McGarry**, authors of the fantasy series *Duchess of the Shallows*; **Chandra Prasad**, author of *Damselfly* and *Mercury Boys*; **Carrie Seim**, author of middle-grade novels *Horse Girl* and *Horse Camp: A Horse Girl Mystery*; and **Debbi Michiko Florence**, author of such books as *Keep It Together*, *Keiko Carter* and *Just Be Cool*, *Jenna Sakai*, among many others. Fantasy author **Ron Kaiser**, author of *Mystralhaven: The Mossbringer*, will join us for the Author Tabletalk.

Session Schedule

9:00 AM – 10:15 AM

Session I

(G: General; EL: Elementary; MS: Middle School; HS: High School; CO: College; N: Great for novice teachers)

- 1. Integrating Mental Health into Middle Grades ELA: Texts, Tools, and Teaching Practices (MS)** *Brooke Eisenbach, Jason Fryman, Brianna Taylor, and Juliana Jones* (Room 217)
This session explores how English Language Arts (ELA) teachers can support students' mental health literacy (MHL) development through collaboration with school counselors and the use of middle-grade texts. Presenters will share strategies for selecting quality literature, partnering with mental health teams, and designing MHL units that foster brave, inclusive classroom spaces for student engagement while simultaneously centering ELA state frameworks.
- 2. Reimagining Adolescent Literacy: Centering Identity, History, and Humanity in Reading Instruction (EL, MS, HS)** *Kati Phelan and Ashley Houston-King* (Room 219)
Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's (2021) *Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacies* will be used as a theoretical framework to examine ways educators can center adolescents' humanities, literacies, identities, and histories in reading education. Presenters will share asset-based strategies and practices to support culturally and historically responsive literacy teaching.
- 3. Teaching Feminist Literature and Battling Book Banners (HS)** *Jessica Webber* (Room 221)
In Fall 2022, I began teaching a class called Through a Feminist Lens where students examine the history of the feminist movement in America. At the same time, a brigade of book banners began a coordinated attack against books, librarians, and education. I joined our community in fighting back while teaching what is unfortunately considered a controversial topic. This workshop will explore how I teach a feminist lit class in rural Maine, what it means to be fearless in standing up for what is right, and the rewards that come from it.
- 4. Building Authentic Voices in an AI World: Students Lead, Teachers Empower (MS, HS)** *Joanne Mumley* (Room 223)
This hands-on workshop introduces game-based journaling strategies inspired by RPGs to boost student agency, creativity, and fearless writing. We will blend proven teaching traditions with innovative tools to empower writers in today's evolving classroom. Experience a sample game, then learn how AI can support your planning and differentiation, freeing you to focus on students leading their own writing journeys. Walk away ready to design engaging, low-stakes activities that build authentic voices and critical thinking.
- 5. Executive Functioning, Reading Processes, and Reading Engagement: Co-Creating Pathways with Readers in the Throes of "I Hate Reading" (EL)** *Justin Stygles* (Room 113)
Have you ever heard the phrase "I Hate Reading!" from a student. Interested in finding where that sentiment comes from and what you can do about it? This session will be devoted to learning how to interact with students to overcome their disdain toward reading by improving self-perceptions and executive functioning to establish competence through various student-oriented and evidenced-based practices.
- 6. Creating Brave Classrooms: Teaching Difficult Histories through Holocaust and Genocide Education (G)** *Barbara Wahlberg and Laura Auketayeva* (Room 115)
This interactive session will offer teachers practical tools and strategies for creating brave yet safe classrooms through Holocaust and Genocide education. Participants will explore innovative approaches to handling challenging discussions about prejudice, human rights, and social justice. Attendees will leave with actionable resources, including newly-updated, comprehensive Holocaust education curricula, available free of charge.

Special Event: Author book readings (Student Theatre)

- 7. Imagining Community with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (HS, CO)** *Miriam Chirico & J. J. Cobb* (Room 217)

Incorporating Thornton Wilder's script *Our Town* coupled with a short improvisational exercise, this session will create communal affiliation within a group of people unfamiliar with each other. Participants will learn about the play while participating in an exercise easily replicated with high school and college students. The exercise teaches us how communities form when people listen, interact, and engage with one another. *Our Town* can facilitate a deep understanding of community by its invitation to see beyond the visible world and use our imagination.
- 8. The Impact of Addressing Social Class in Middle and High School ELA Classrooms (MS, HS, CO)** *Alexis Godden Demers, Nicole Godard, and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides* (Room 219)

As one of the most taboo topics to discuss in public, social class can be a tender subject to introduce into an ELA classroom. This presentation features what happens when ELA teachers adopt an approach to addressing social class that focuses on feelings, and how middle and high school students respond to being invited to use such learning to unpack literature and their lives. Come learn about key texts, vocabulary and in-class strategies for bringing a robust topic safely into your own classrooms.
- 9. Using Poetry as a 'Safe Place' to Foster Students' Emotional Courage in Grappling with Challenging Societal Issues (HS)** *Mary Hoyt* (Room 221)

Participants will learn instructional strategies to integrate poetry that reflects controversial global uncertainties. As the high school classroom is a place where student agency and voices are encouraged and celebrated, it is a perfect environment for nurturing respectful discourse. By affording students a trusted setting for exploring multiple perspectives, building confidence in self as informed citizens, and expanding their global mindedness, teachers support students in developing not only an expanded knowledgebase, but the resilience, valor, and personal integrity with which to apply that understanding in "standing up for what is right" in society.
- 10. Teaching Immigration Today (MS, HS)** *Rob Ford & Amy Papantonio* (Room 223)

Teaching about refugees and immigration, especially in today's political climate, is difficult and takes courage, but is incredibly important to promote community. Many students have immigration stories: including accessible fiction and memoirs from people of other cultures allow all students to be seen and heard and to feel safe in the classroom. This session will share two approaches, one geared to middle school and the other, high school, to teaching about refugees and immigration in American literature and history. Attendees will walk away with two units of study with accompanying resources.
- 11. How a Personal Approach to Professional Development Creates Brave Educators and Brave(r) Students (HS, CO)** *Janet Johnson, Jeff Lawton, and Anne Barnhart* (Room 113)

In this interactive session, we will explore how connecting the personal with the professional helps create brave and supportive spaces in high school and college classrooms. This involves a journey toward the truth of our experience, one that exists outside the neatly packaged and curated boxes being forced upon and around us. Participants will engage in writing and reflection that encourage risk-taking, learn how other educators have applied these frameworks, and leave with practical strategies they can adapt to their own classrooms.
- 12. Creating Space and Place for Difficult Texts in Middle School (MS)** *Abigail Donovan, Jillian Jewett, and Allyson Manchester* (Room 115)

This session addresses a unit redesign of Melba Pattillo Beals's memoir *Warriors Don't Cry*. Students are asked to create meaningful text-to-self connections related to the topic of justice, equity, and education. Having open and respectful dialogue is integral to the development of student voice and knowing how to guide these conversations in the classroom can be challenging. Join us as we navigate difficult topics using journaling, community engagement, and contemporary connections.

Special Event: Author Q-and-A (Student Theatre)

- 13. Journals that Spark Joy: Artifact-Based Strategies for Reluctant Writers (MS)** *Tara Temprano* (Room 217)
Join us to explore Artifact Writing, where personal treasures—like photos, leaves, or ticket stubs—transform into rich narratives! You'll learn to craft three paragraphs about your artifact: the scene, what you love about it, and why it's unforgettable. Plus, discover how to spark creativity with list poems and write both true and fictional stories inspired by your artifacts. Ignite reluctant writers' imaginations with the magic of artifact journaling!
- 14. Building a New Society (MS, HS)** *Susannah Boersma* (Room 221)
Many science fiction and dystopian novels prompt students to consider how exactly a society should be run. In my 8th grade classroom, we took this assignment to a whole new level by designing and critiquing entirely new societies. This workshop offers examples and tools for creating similar cross-curricular world building projects in your own classroom.
- 15. Joy, Genius, and Identity: Cognitively Demanding Literacy Instruction for Students with Complex Needs (EL, MS, HS)** *Kim Kulasekaran, Sarah Wakabayashi, and Lena Spear* (Room 219)
Students with significant disabilities deserve access to literacy instruction that gives them the power to read and write, AND the means to make meaning of who they are in the world. Join us as we apply Gholdy Muhammad's "Historical Responsive Literacy Model" to our teaching of students with complex communication and AAC needs. Using the Readtopia curriculum and other literacy resources, our students can access learning that challenges them to find themselves, nurtures their intellect, and teaches critical thinking.
- 16. The Totalitarian Teacher: On Power in the Classroom (HS)** *Matt Goetz* (Room 223)
This session invites educators to examine how everyday instructional choices—grading policies, curriculum design, and classroom management—can either reinforce or resist systems of control. Drawing from foundational thinkers such as Foucault, Young, Freire, and Marx, participants will explore how traditional classroom structures may undermine student agency. Through collaborative group work and critical discussion, educators will reflect on their own practices and reimagine their roles, not as central authorities—but as co-learners to create classrooms that foster student ownership, autonomy, curiosity, and meaningful intellectual engagement.
- 17. Facilitating Critical Dialogue: Navigating the Struggle and Risk of Valuing All Voices (G)** *Cara Mulcahy, Louise Shaw, and Katharine Covino* (Room 113)
We invite you to a collaborative workshop with the goal of forging deeper understandings to create safe spaces for our students. Join us as we share tools and strategies for navigating difficult conversations and fostering student voice and expression. The workshop promises a meaningful opportunity to consider practices that will empower educators to foster trusting environments based on respect, vulnerability, and understanding to ask discomforting and important questions, to embrace the real possibility of disagreement, and to recognize moments of limitation.
- 18. The Writer's Triangle: Using Audience, Purpose, and Format to Encourage Creative Risk Taking in Young Writers (MS, HS)** *Hilary Martin* (Room 115)
This workshop will introduce interactive, whole class activities and individual conferencing strategies for providing limited, targeted feedback to guide students toward seeing themselves as writers with agency over their work. Participants will test drive activities and leave with specific, concrete curriculum they can use to implement choice writing in their own classrooms. Although primarily geared toward high school teachers, most of the activities in this workshop could easily be adapted for middle or elementary school students.

Special Event: Poet-of-the-Year Readings (Student Theatre)

Rachel Becker, James Kin, Frederick-Douglass Knowles, Benjamin Taylor Lally, and Grant McDermott.

Special Event: Author Tabletalks (BTR)

19. Rooted in Legacy: Black Women Educators, Literacy, and the Pursuit of Educational Justice (G)

Ashley Houston-King (Room 217)

Historically, Black girls and women have been at the forefront of the fight toward racial and gender equality in education (Muhammad et al, 2020; Baumgartner, 2019). This session offers a historical snapshot of six Black women from the 19th and early 20th centuries, examining how they navigated anti-Black literacy laws and engaged in literacy practices and educational activism. The session will conclude with a group discussion on key takeaways and actionable steps to apply this learning to our instructional practices and academic context.

20. Engaging “Productive Discomfort” in the Classroom: A Safe Space Alternative (MS, HS, CO)

David Sterling Brown (Room 219)

This workshop will introduce attendees to the “productive discomfort” teaching methodology that merges the critical, personal, and experiential and champions “brave space” logic. Productive discomfort leans into difficult discourses on contentious topics and fearlessly engages students’ backgrounds, identities, and experiences. This pedagogy expands the boundaries of students’ comfort zones by challenging their existing assumptions and biases, teaching students to embrace difficult feelings and engage with tough intellectual problems.

21. Dangerous (Artificial) Minds: Engaging Student Critical Thinking and Analysis in their Interactions with AI (HS, CO) *David Nurenberg* (Room 221)

Generative AI has rendered traditional writing-based assessments of student knowledge and thinking, if not obsolete, at least highly problematic. Banning the use of Large Language Models (LLMs) is both unenforceable and unrealistic, yet integrating them into the learning process must be thoughtful and deliberate to promote, and not replace, students’ faculties in critical analysis. In a world where everyone has access to AI, how can students make THEIR thinking stand out? This presentation will share my experiences, in the context of relevant literature, and invite participants to share their own ideas and experiences.

22. Inviting Poetic Courage: The Power of Japanese Short Poem Craft (MS, HS) *Holly Thompson and Miho Kinnas* (Room 223)

Short poems reflect shifting worlds. This workshop introduces haiku—its origins, derivative forms, and evolving applications in changing societies. We aim to demystify and push against exoticism and oversimplification surrounding this enduring form. With power of association as a core value, this workshop presents applications of haiku and other three-line-poem forms, offering varied approaches for all learners. Exploring craft via quick writing exercises, we’ll encourage risk taking as we uncover the versatility of the three-line poem with a range of forms. We’ll offer classroom approaches, sharing collaborative opportunities and outreach project examples.

23. Yes, They Can! Using Socratic Seminar to Amplify Student Voices (MS, N) *Jackie Rehm* (Room 113)

With structure and targeted support, middle schoolers can facilitate thoughtful discussions on literature and its connection to the modern world. We will explore the opportunities in your own curriculum to implement this transformative discussion activity. In this session, participants will learn by DOING! Participants will leave the session with printed materials (as well as Google Drive link) to implement the concepts in their own classroom.

24. Hosting an Academic “Dinner Party”: Bringing People and Ideas to the Table (MS, HS, CO) *Katie Gordon and Erin Birden* (Room 115)


Much of the work of literacy educators invites conversations that require brave spaces. This interactive workshop describes one learning sequence from a gender studies course but interrogates the pedagogical moves that could become transferable to other contexts. After immersing participants in the initial stimulus, we will delineate how we set the table for collaborative meaning making through multiple iterations of exploration, dialogue, and reflection. Which of these elements could you roll into something you want to do better; which of these elements can you infuse into your curriculum? Dream alongside fellow educators for short and long term “could be’s.”


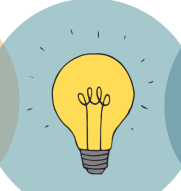

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**LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE**
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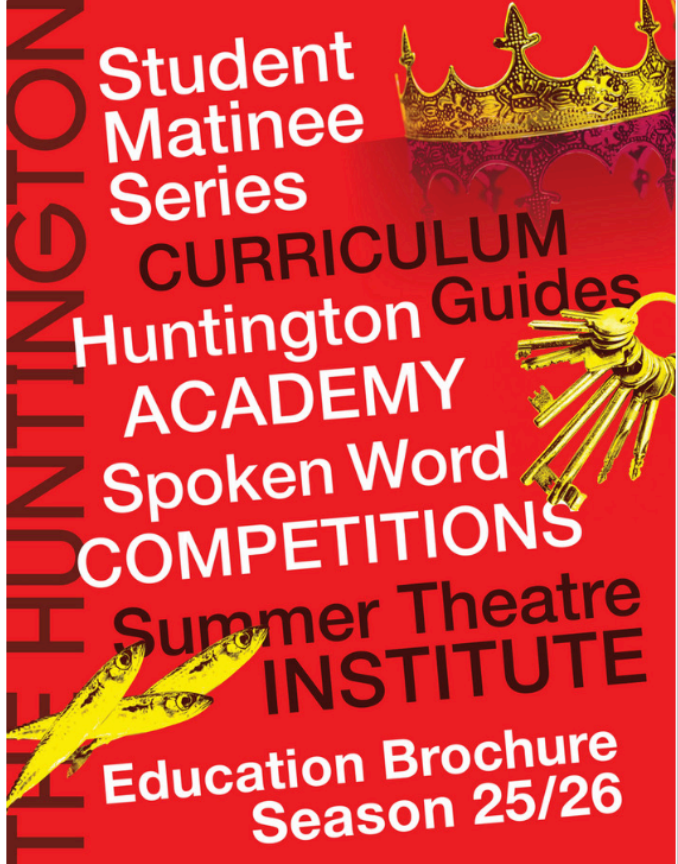



READ. BE INSPIRED. WRITE BACK.

Students read a book of their choice, reflect on it, and write a personal letter to the author, explaining the impact the book had on them.

This statewide initiative for 4th through 12th graders sees participation from thousands of young writers each year, and recognizes winning students, their teachers, and librarians at an annual celebration at the Massachusetts State House. Top students in each level win a cash prize.

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massbook.org/letters-about-literature

A vibrant red poster for the Huntington Academy Spoken Word COMPETITIONS Summer Theatre INSTITUTE Education Brochure Season 25/26. The text is arranged in a dynamic, overlapping fashion. A golden crown is positioned at the top right, and a set of golden keys is on the right side. Two yellow fish are depicted at the bottom left. The background features a subtle pattern of the word 'HUNTINGTON' repeated vertically.

About the MHLC

Our mission is to make the education framework of mental health literacy foundational in schools and communities.



FACING HISTORY & OURSELVES



Outdoor Classroom



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