

**New England Association of Teachers of English
and
Connecticut Council of Teachers of English**

123rd Annual Conference
Brave Spaces, Safe Spaces

**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.

Session Schedule

8:00 AM – 11:45 AM Registration (Lobby)

8:00 AM – 9:00 AM Breakfast (Betty Tipton Room—BTR)

9:00 AM – 11:45 AM Vendors and Exhibits (BTR)

9:00 AM – 10:15 AM Session I

(G: General; ES: Elementary; MS: Middle School; HS: High School; CO: College)

1. Integrating Mental Health into Middle Grades ELA: Texts, Tools, and Teaching Practices (MS) *Brooke Eisenbach, Jason Fryman, Brianna Taylor, and Juliana Jones*

Today's adolescents face rising mental health challenges. Schools need safe, timely, and cost-effective ways to promote mental health literacy (MHL) without overburdening teachers or relying on one-size-fits-all approaches. Literature offers a gateway to reduce stigma and normalize mental health conversations in the classroom. This session explores how English Language Arts (ELA) teachers can support students' 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. Room 217

2. Reimagining Adolescent Literacy: Centering Identity, History, and Humanity in Reading Instruction (EL, MS, HS) *Kati Phelan and Ashley Houston-King*

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's (2021) *Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacies* will be used as a theoretical framework to look at 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. Room 219

3. Teaching Feminist Literature and Battling Book Banners (EL) *Jessica Webber* In the fall of 2022, I began teaching a class called Through a Feminist Lens where my students examine the history of the feminist movement in America. At the same time, a brigade of book banners descended upon our district and 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. Room 221

4. Building Authentic Voices in an AI World: Students Lead, Teachers Empower (MS, HS) *Joanne Mumley* Reimagine writing instruction with Building Authentic Voices in an AI World: Students Lead, Teachers Empower. This hands-on workshop introduces game-based journaling strategies inspired by RPGs to boost student agency, creativity, and fearless writing. 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. Perfect for teachers wanting to blend proven teaching traditions with innovative tools to empower writers in today's evolving classroom. Room 223

5. Executive Functioning, Reading Processes, and Reading Engagement: Co-Creating Pathways with Readers in the Throes of “I Hate Reading” (EL) *Justin Stygles*

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. Room 113

6. Creating Brave Classrooms: Teaching Difficult Histories through Holocaust and Genocide Education (G) *Barbara Wahlberg, Pauline Getzoyan, Wendy Joering, and Laura Auketayeva* This interactive session, led by the Sandra Bornstein Holocaust Education Center and the Rhode Island Holocaust and Genocide Education Commission, 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. Through storytelling, critical reflection, and empathy-building exercises, teachers will learn to foster courageous conversations and creative risk-taking among students. Attendees will leave equipped with actionable resources, including the newly updated and comprehensive Holocaust education curricula, available free of charge thanks to generous donors. Room 115

Special Event: Author readings (Student Theatre)

Invited authors will read selections from their works.

10:30 AM – 11:45 AM Session II

7. Imagining Community with Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (HS, CO) *Miriam Chirico and J. J. Cobb* Incorporating Thornton Wilder’s script *Our Town* coupled with a short improvisational exercise, this session will create communal affiliation within a group of people who are unfamiliar with each other. Participants will learn information 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. The seemingly time-worn play *Our Town* can actually facilitate a deep understanding of community by its invitation to see beyond the visible world and use our imagination. Room 217

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* 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. Room 219

9. Using Poetry as a ‘Safe Place’ to Foster Students’ Emotional Courage in Grappling with Challenging Societal Issues (HS) *Mary Hoyt*

The facilitator of this interactive workshop will present instructional strategies for integrating 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. Room 221

10. Teaching Immigration Today (MS, HS) *Rob Ford and Amy Papantonio* Teaching about refugees and immigration, especially in today's political climate, is difficult and takes courage, but is incredibly important to promote community. Many of our 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. Room 223

11. How a Personal Approach to Professional Development Creates Brave Educators and Brave(r) Students (HS, CO) *Janet Johnson, Jeff Lawton, and Anne Barnhart*

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.

Room 113

12. Creating Space and Place for Difficult Texts in Middle School (MS) *Abigail Donovan, Jillian Jewett, and Allyson Manchester*

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. Leave this session with the confidence to tackle sensitive topics with your students. Room 115

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

Audience members are invited to ask questions. Selected books will be available for purchase and signing.

11:45 AM – 12:30 PM Lunch (BTR)

12:30 PM – 1:30 PM Keynote Speaker:

Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling (BTR)

1:45 PM – 4:30 PM Vendors and Exhibits (BTR)

1:45 PM – 3:00 PM Session III

- 13. Journals that Spark Joy: Artifact-Based Strategies for Reluctant Writers (EL, MS)** *Tara Temprano* 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! Room 217
- 14. Building a New Society (MS, HS)** *Susannah Boersma*
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. Room 221
- 15. Joy, Genius, and Identity: Cognitively Demanding Literacy Instruction for Students with Complex Needs (EL, MS, HS)** *Kim Kulasekaran, Sarah Wakabayashi, and Lena Spear* Equity and excellence in every classroom - yes, EVERY classroom! 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, along with Erickson and Koppenhaver's book *Comprehensive Literacy for All*, our students can access learning that challenges them to find themselves, nurtures their intellect and teaches critical thinking. Room 219
- 16. The Totalitarian Teacher: On Power in the Classroom (HS)** *Matt Goetz* This session invites educators to examine how everyday instructional choices—grading policies, curriculum design, classroom management, and teacher-student interactions—can either reinforce or resist systems of control. Drawing from foundational thinkers such as Foucault on power, Young on oppression, Freire on critical consciousness, and Marx on alienated labor, 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. The session offers tools to create classrooms that foster student ownership, autonomy, curiosity, and meaningful intellectual engagement. Room 223
- 17. Yes, They Can! Using Socratic Seminar to Amplify Student Voices (MS)** *Jackie Rehm* Some people think Socratic Seminars are only for AP high school students...That is simply NOT true! With structure and targeted support, middle schoolers are capable of facilitating 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. Furthermore, in this session, participants will learn by DOING! Participants will leave the session with printed materials (as well as Google Drive link) with variations/ideas on how to implement in their own classroom. Room 113

18. The Writer's Triangle: Using Audience, Purpose, and Format to Encourage Creative Risk Taking in Young Writers (MS, HS) Hilary Martin

How can teachers jumpstart a writing community? By establishing the connection between identifying audience and purpose by selecting an accessible and compelling format. 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. Room 115

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

Finalists will read selections of their submissions, and the Poet-of-the-Year will be recognized. *List poet finalists*

Special Event: Author Tabletalk (BTR)

Published authors host informal conversations about writing, publishing, or research. Authors' books will be available for purchase and signing.

3:15 PM – 4:30 PM Session IV

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

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 for applying this learning to our instructional practices and academic context. Room 217

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

This workshop will introduce attendees to Dr. David Sterling Brown's signature “productive discomfort” teaching methodology—published in the American Association of College and Universities' magazine, *Liberal Education* (March 2024)—that merges the critical, personal, and experiential and champions “brave space” logic. Productive discomfort leans into difficult discourses on a variety of contentious topics and fearlessly engages students' personal backgrounds, identities, and experiences. This pedagogical philosophy uses the learning process to expand the boundaries of students' comfort zones by challenging their existing assumptions and biases, ultimately teaching students to embrace difficult feelings and engage with tough intellectual problems. Room 219

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

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. Room 221

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

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, solo and collaborative, we'll encourage risk taking as we uncover the versatility of the three-line poem with a range of forms (haiku, senryu, tanka, haibun, renbun). We'll offer classroom approaches and share collaborative opportunities and outreach project examples. Room 223

23. Facilitating Critical Dialogue: Navigating the Struggle and Risk of Valuing All Voices (G) *Cara Mulcahy, Louise Shaw, and Katharine Covino*

Building on decades of teaching experience, we invite participants to a collaborative workshop with the goal of forging deeper understandings for creating 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 a) to foster trusting environments based on respect, vulnerability, and understanding where taking risks is not only accepted, but valued, b) to ask discomfiting and important questions, c) to embrace the real possibility of disagreement and d) to recognize moments of limitation. Room 113

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

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.” Room 115

4:30 PM – 5:00 PM Closing Activities (BTR)

Award presentations, closing words, special recognitions