Our generation of English teachers, as others before us, must reevaluate what we do, how we do it, and why it is all still necessary. In a world where we are told the book is a dying relic and that the word is giving way to the image some of our pressing questions include: Why do we insist on teaching the novels, poems, and plays of people who are long since perished; works of fiction and drama written by people who may have held problematic and politically incorrect worldviews that implicitly demeaned the students who are now asked to read and cherish them? Why does the English classroom look so similarly to what it did a generation ago when the world of literacy is so rapidly changing? Should English teaching change as the population of students change? If we hold on to the teaching of literature as a primary focus, what literature should be taught and what approaches to literature should students be encouraged to undertake? Should we amend our priorities in English education as the communications technologies transform to make life utterly unrecognizable to the worlds that many of our canonized authors inhabit? And what in English is sacred and untouchable? What is essential at the elementary and secondary levels? How does it relate, if at all, to English as defined and taught in undergraduate and graduate level seminars at our colleges and universities? And, in the spirit of the Japanese concept of Kaizen, or continuous improvement, what can we can do to be more powerful, more relevant, and yet retain our character and traditions?

In short we have to envision what powerful English teaching looks like in today’s classrooms as we prepare to invent the future of the discipline. When thinking about these pressing questions I am taken back to an interview that I had during my senior year of college over 20 years ago. I was participating in an obligatory interview session as part of the application process for my university’s teacher education program. In response to the perennial question (why English teaching and why you) I offered all of the reasons that any relatively successful undergraduate English major of my era would provide; a love of the text, a love of writing, giving students the gift of language and I was stopped mid-flow by the interviewer who kindly reminded me, “You don’t teach English, you teach students English.” That reprimand has stayed with me all these years and it informs my thinking as well as my practice. Truly powerful English must exist as a transaction between our students and the worlds of the past and present as represented through a myriad of texts and genres. Our central task is to ascertain what our students want and need from us in this rapidly changing world and what, from the discipline of English, makes the most sense to give them? There are questions of what (curriculum), how (pedagogy), and why (college access, jobs, civic engagement, personal emancipation, or creative production) that need to be continually asked and answered by English teachers across the pre-K–16 spectrum as we work together to understand our students, the changing nature of literacy, and the power of language in our moment in time. I look forward to receiving your proposals and continuing this rich and essential dialogue as we prepare to navigate our second century as an organization.