

Literary Learning

The Newsletter for Vermont's English Language Arts Educators and Supporters

October 2019

Happy (Belated) School Year

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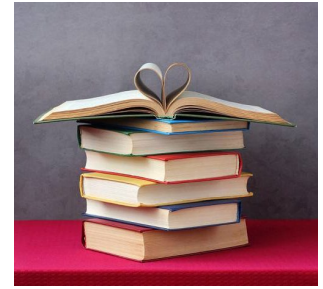
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How to Access this Newsletter:

- ✓ Request subscription by emailing [Emily Leute](#) (your name will be added to a Listserv)
- ✓ The AOE *Weekly Field Memo*
- ✓ The AOE Website: [English Content Page](#)



Happy (Belated) School Year

Greetings fellow educators! Now that you have several weeks of school under your belts, I hope that you are settling in to some sort of rhythm. This school year has been particularly jarring for me, but that's because of extenuating circumstances, including a new job, home, and addition to my family.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Emily Leute and I am your new content specialist for English Language Arts (ELA) on the [Proficiency-Based Learning Team](#) at the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE). I come to you with fourteen years of experience in education, thirteen of which I spent teaching high school English and drama. I am thrilled to begin this chapter of my career, having just returned from parental leave mid-October (hence the delay in getting out my first newsletter of the school year). Reading and writing have always been passions of mine, as has the idea of providing students with equitable access to high quality education. It is my goal to use this newsletter as a vehicle to deliver content that will support you in your efforts to do just that.

But this newsletter isn't about me – it's about improving our practice in order to best meet the diverse needs of our students. That's why I will continuously solicit your feedback and input regarding the types of articles, resources, and professional learning opportunities you would like to see included in this publication. Currently, the AOE is working on building communication around equity, so this will often be a focus of the newsletter. Other topics will include proficiency-based learning, the English language arts classroom, and any other high interest and relevant topic I come across (with your continuous input, of course).

Professional Strengths and Needs Assessment

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please take a moment to fill out this [questionnaire](#) and let us know about your professional learning needs.

Equity Literacy – It’s More Than Just Diversity Awareness

I first heard the term “equity literacy” during my first week here at the Agency of Education. As a person who prides myself on my open mind and ability to “celebrate diversity,” I thought I had a good idea of what was meant by it. After all, discussions about diversity and culture had long been a part of my ELA curriculum. I even devoted a whole unit of study to the topic of “identity.” To brush up on my knowledge, I read some of the publications of colleague here at the Agency (Susan Yesalonia’s [Linking Health and Learning Newsletter](#), August 2019 and Emily Titterton’s [Arts Newsletter](#), July-August 2019) and did some research of my own. As a result of my research, I have come to realize that there is more to equity literacy than just recognizing inequity and celebrating diversity.

Paul Gorski, founder of the [Equity Literacy Institute](#), defines equity literacy as the “skills and dispositions that enable us to recognize, respond to and redress (i.e., correct for) conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers. Equity literacy also describes the skills and dispositions that allow us to create and sustain equitable and just learning environments for all families and students” ([Gorski, 2014](#)). In other words, it isn’t enough to simply notice and attempt to address inequity in the classroom; we, as educators, have a responsibility to anticipate potential instances of inequity and find ways to mitigate them so that all of our students have equal access to a safe learning environment that honors their differences and takes steps to prevent further challenges in the future. In the instances in which we are not able to prevent inequity, it is our responsibility to have the hard conversations with our students that examine the causes and effects of inequitable practices.

Are you an equity literate educator? Check out Gorski’s [Equity Literacy Framework](#) to see if you are properly equipped to “be *a threat to the existence of inequity* in our spheres of influence” by seeing “even subtle ways in which access and opportunity are distributed unfairly across race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, language, and other factors.” It is important for us to take stock of our own practices as educators and to examine conditions that could lead to inequity in our classrooms. As Gorski says, “[b]y recognizing and deeply understanding these conditions, we are prepared to respond to inequity in transformational ways in the immediate term. We also strengthen our ability to foster longer-term change by redressing the bigger institutional and societal conditions that produce the everyday manifestations of inequity” ([Gorski, 2018](#)).

For more information about equity literacy, visit the [Equity Literacy Institute](#).

Gender Equity and Language (Yes, It's Grammatically Correct)

Language is ever-changing. It evolves in order to both reflect and promote the developing needs of a society. Because of the power of language, it is important for educators to stay current when it comes to proper usage and the effects it can have on inclusivity. For example, the use of the pronoun "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun was replaced decades ago by the more inclusive (though admittedly clunky) "he or she" or "s/he." This was done in an effort to decrease implicit sexism in language. In a time in which we are beginning to recognize the non-binary nature of gender, however, we are also realizing the constraints this pronoun usage puts on our efforts to be more equitable. This raises the question; how can we use inclusive language in a grammatically correct way?

In October of 2018, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a [Statement on Gender and Language](#) which promotes the use of gender-inclusive language. As a staunch supporter of proper grammar and a person known to cringe at its misuse, I was pleasantly surprised to come across this document. The NCTE's statement is "based in the contemporary understanding that gender is a cultural construct that is not limited to binary categories" and therefore "recommends usage that moves beyond the gender binary in order to include individuals whose identities might otherwise be unacknowledged or devalued." Once considered improper grammar, the pronoun "they" is now approved by many authorities as an acceptable (and even recommended!) singular antecedent (The *Chicago Manual of Style*, 2017 and the *Associated Press Stylebook*, 2018). Even the Purdue Online Learning Lab (OWL), a resource I myself consult for up to date information regarding proper writing, has published an article called "[Gendered Pronouns & Singular 'They'](#)" in which they point out that formal language is simply catching up with conversational language in an effort to include as many people as possible.

Some proponents of a more traditional approach to grammar may balk at this shift while others may be concerned that the shift is of a political nature and, therefore, has no place in the classroom. The truth is, however, that language is always evolving. The intention here is not to promote a specific political agenda, but to increase inclusivity in language. After all, the most important thing is for all our students to feel safe and included and making sure our language reflects their individual identities is an excellent step in this direction.

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We're on the Web!

See us at:

<https://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/content-areas/language-arts>

Resources

Read more about this month's topics here:

- Equity Literacy:
 - [EdChange](#)
 - [Equity Literacy Resources](#) from the Vermont AOE
 - [Equity Resources](#) from the [Equity Literacy Institute](#)
 - [Teaching Tolerance](#)
- Professional Organizations:
 - [National Council of Teachers of English \(NCTE\)](#)
- Writing:
 - [The Purdue Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](#)

Professional Offerings**Local Comprehensive Assessment System Convenings**

Audience: Leadership Teams

Assessment plays a central role in the assurance of equitable outcomes for all students. Excellent instruction and systemic decision-making require high-quality assessment information. When assessment systems provide comprehensive and meaningful information, then decisions about students are more likely to be accurate, students are better able to judge their own performance and set new goals, and families are more knowledgeable about how their children are doing. In order to support the development of high-quality local comprehensive assessment systems, the Agency of Education will be holding four convenings, in both northern and southern locations, that will address the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to implement strong assessment systems.

Please see the [registration](#) for additional information, dates and times.

Contact: Pat Fitzsimmons at (802) 828-5896 or by [email](#).

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