

### 3 Stella Stewart Center: Proceeding under Their Own Power

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If you are a poor reader, you are not a self-reliant student. Through this planned study and more like it, you can come into your own as a reader and travel under your own power. The whole plan is worth a fair intelligent trial. Do you not agree?

Stella S. Center and Gladys L. Persons,  
*Practices in Reading and Thinking*



Stella Stewart Center  
1878-1969

Two photographs of Stella Stewart Center, taken at different times in her life, have a notable similarity. Each depicts her on the left-hand side, seated in half-profile with her eyes cast down on pages she holds in her hands. The earlier photograph appeared in a journal article commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the National Council of Teachers of English ("National Council," 827); the second was printed nearly thirty years later (Sullivan 1965, 7) when Center had taken residence as a reading consultant at her alma mater, Tift College for Women in Forsyth, Georgia. As images of a woman

reading, these two pictures are fitting bookends for the career of Stella Stewart Center, for it was one dedicated to the value of reading.

A brief delineation of Center's life will illustrate the place her work has in the history of our profession of teaching English. Center came from a well-established, economically comfortable, white southern family. Her grandfather had been a member of the Alabama state legislature (Sullivan 1965, 6). She was born in 1878 in Forsyth, Georgia, where she also spent the last four years of her life, dying at age eighty-three in 1969, not many days after enthusiastically watching the

moonwalk on television (Baykin 1969). Typical of other white women who came of age in the late nineteenth century, Stella Center looked on the teaching of children as a suitable career; indeed, it was almost the only honorable paid vocation and alternative to the role of homemaker. Her education was designed to prepare her for the teaching of English: A.B. from Tift College for Women (in her native city of Forsyth) and George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Ph.B. (bachelor of pedagogy) from the University of Chicago, M.A. from Columbia University's Teachers College, and finally Litt.D. (doctorate of letters) from the University of Georgia ("Our Own Who's Who" 1933, 166).

Although the South was her ancestral home, both the extent and the quality of Center's higher education suggest that in the early twentieth century she would find more career opportunities in the urban Northeast. And so she did: Center spent most of her professional life, from 1914 to 1955, in New York City (Sullivan 1965, 6). From 1917 to 1931 she was an instructor in the program of "secretarial correspondence" of Columbia University, but for many years her principal work was in secondary school teaching at Julia Richmond High School, Walton Junior and Senior High School, John Adams High School, where she was head ("first assistant") of the English Department, and ultimately Theodore Roosevelt High School, where again she was head of the English Department and also director of a reading school ("Our Own Who's Who" 1933, 166; Baykin 1969). From 1936 to 1950 she brought her expertise in reading and her administrative ability to the Reading Institute of New York University, which she codirected with Gladys L. Persons, and extended her teaching energy to adult learners, whom she taught in the institute's evening school (Center 1952, xv). Fourteen years after beginning her career in New York City, Center had become prominent in the National Council of Teachers of English. In 1928 she became second vice-president; in 1930 she cochaired, with Max J. Herzberg, of New Jersey, the Council's Committee on Recreational Reading, producing two influential reports; and in 1932 Center became the Council's twenty-first president and the third woman to fill that position. During her career she wrote or edited several educational books for school or commercial distribution, as well as a research study published as the Council's sixth monograph; the topic of most of her published work, like that of her teaching work, was reading.

That reading was the focus of Stella Center's professional life is of historical importance for present-day teachers of English, both in secondary schools and in colleges. In her work we find indexes of her times and our past—four decades of change and challenge for English

in America—and noticeable connections with developments in our times.

From its inception in 1911, the National Council of Teachers of English made reading a prominent concern, as the very circumstances of the Council's foundation indicate. NCTE was formed in reaction to the attempt by the National Education Association to impose uniform college entrance requirements on the preparatory schools and thus to control the curricula of the schools. In the case of English, the requirements dictated that students were to know certain literary texts (see "National Council"; Hook 1979; Applebee 1974; Berlin 1987). Those educators who founded NCTE were opposed to standard requirements, not to literary texts. Even so, they were critical of the texts named on the lists. They advocated the addition of contemporary fiction and also a wider range in the type of reading expected of students. Some argued for the value of reading even for students not bound for college.

NCTE's long-standing attitude toward the primacy of reading is reflected in some of Stella Center's work for the Council. Although teachers evidently continued to prescribe traditional texts in school, since 1913 the Council had sought to broaden the reading curriculum, or at least high school students' exposure to books, by publishing a list of books for "hon.e" reading. As cochairs of the Council's Committee on Recreational Reading in 1930, Center and Herzberg undertook the rewriting of this list, first composed by Herbert Bates in 1913 and brought up to date by him in 1923. In the hands of Center and Herzberg, the 1930 pamphlet *Books for Home Reading* expanded from Bates's original eleven pages of recommended fiction, drama, poetry, biography, collections, history and mythology, speeches, travel and adventure, and "other works not classified," to eight times that number. Besides adding many authors and titles to Bates's list, Center and Herzberg streamlined the original categories, listed the title first rather than the author's last name, filled the pamphlet with illustrations from editions of the texts included—many in color—and addressed the pamphlet to students rather than teachers. As a result, the 1930 *Books for Home Reading*, and its revision in 1937, was transformed from a "pharmacopoeia" for teachers to use as if "prescrib[ing] the right medicine" (Report of the Committee upon Home Reading, 4), to one for students themselves to browse through, looking for "books you will like to read" (Herzberg and Center 1930, 4). In 1932 Center and Herzberg inaugurated a separate pamphlet for seventh through ninth graders, entitled *Leisure Reading*, which followed the same enticing format. A revised version appeared in 1938.

For both high school and junior high school students, Center and Herzberg suggested that readers not limit themselves to books that were easy to read or of one kind only, that they give a second chance to a book that bored them when they were younger, and that they form their own program of reading. Center and Herzberg encouraged reading books not as a "school duty" but as "one of life's greatest pleasures" (4).

Although the idea of reading lists was as old as the Council itself, Stella Center's work on the Committee on Recreational Reading exemplified her concern for the reading ability of secondary school students. She became convinced that reading instruction was inadequate: children intelligent enough to do well in secondary school were failing because they had not learned to read, and students were leaving school—graduating or dropping out—with their reading ability sorely undeveloped. It was the force of Center's work that made the teaching of reading, not just the presentation of great books, a subject in the secondary schools. Although her position may not seem unusual now, it was then. According to Dora V. Smith, "She certainly alerted the Council to the fact that reading skills belong in the secondary school as well as in the elementary school and that reading *literature* has a technique all its own. Until that time *reading* was an elementary school subject" (1969, 1-2).

Center's approach to reading and her view of its value to children and adults are evident in several of her publications and convention papers spanning her career. Although wholly without any editorial comment on its theory and purpose, one of the first and most remarkable of these publications is *The Worker and His Work* (1920), which Center edited as part of a series of literature textbooks. It contained a few poems, several illustrations of graphic and sculptural art, and over 150 selections from different sources, largely but not exclusively fiction, all displaying the labor that people perform in the United States and in other countries. The authors were by and large contemporaries, "present-day," as the subtitle says; as an addendum, Center included a brief description of each author, listing place of residence, even the address. Although most of the selections described men at work, some also showed women, such as Edna Ferber's story of Fanny Brandeis (including the motif of anti-Semitism) and Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, a work on leftist and feminist reading lists today. In general, the selections, although not devoid of tragedy or criticism for the conditions of the laborers, are optimistic accounts of labor—"making a living"—seen as interesting and successful, such as the following poem (Morgan 1920, 37):

Work!  
Thank God for the might of it,  
The ardor, the urge, the delight of it—  
Work that springs from the heart's desire,  
Setting the brain and the soul on fire—  
Oh, what is so good as the heat of it,  
And what is so glad as the beat of it,  
And what is so kind as the stern command,  
Challenging brain and heart and hand?

A recognizable forerunner of readers in today's composition courses, *The Worker and His Work* is, in its form as an anthology of literary selections, a relatively early example of one method that English educators used to broaden the school reading lists. In the prominence it gave to contemporary writers, Center's anthology shared the Council's emphasis on contemporary as well as traditional texts. The slant of the biographical information served to make the readings seem accessible: these were living people to whom a student might even write a letter, not ancients to be revered. In having one theme, the anthology used a method shared by some other educators who hoped that students would be enticed to read about issues of consequence to them. It is in its particular theme of work, however, that Center's anthology is especially intriguing. Although the perspective was not fully proletarian, the anthology did celebrate workers. The theme reflected the opportunities for jobs and the values of pride, ingenuity, and efficiency in working well that befit the industrial, capitalistic United States before the Great Depression. The choice of such a theme reflected the responsibility of the English teacher, in Center's eyes, to prepare students not only for higher education but also for the world of work. This textbook provides evidence of the shifting emphasis of school from "a 'fitting school' oriented toward college entrance" to "a school for the people, whose chief function would be preparation for life" (Applebee 1974, 46). The generally optimistic tone of the anthology also reflected the attitude of the schools toward industry before the Depression: business was an ally of education, giving English teachers a purpose for teaching literacy (see Tyack, Lowe, and Hansot 1984). As a historical artifact, Stella Stewart Center's *Worker and His Work* does reflect a period of American culture, but textbooks like these were not simply passive mirrors; they were also agents of social change, change that such teachers as Center believed, in the tradition of John Dewey, was social progress.

Twelve years after *The Worker and His Work*, Center affirmed her belief in the power of reading to effect social progress, but in a context

very different from the one celebrated by that anthology: the onset of the Great Depression. Her presidential address of 24 November 1932, "The Responsibility of Teachers of English in Contemporary American Life," touched on several matters, among them the English teacher's responsibility for teaching reading as a major means of producing a "thinking" electorate, as cultural enrichment, as a useful activity for nonworking hours, and as a way of promoting world peace and international cooperation. Center urged teachers to exploit the political impact of reading, stating that only recently had "textbooks and courses of study recognized the necessity of teaching boys and girls how to read newspapers and periodicals" (1933, 102). The United States needed, she argued, an electorate capable of weighing speeches, newspapers, and magazines; toward this end, English teachers had a "powerful lever that might accomplish wonders" (103). Furthermore, as she argued elsewhere in her speech, courses in literature might include "literature of liberal internationalism," thus hastening "the day when negotiation and conference instead of war become the chief instrument of foreign policy." By having students read such literature in a time when "tariff walls" were mounting and political leaders were pursuing a policy of isolation, English teachers might be able to develop a "feeling of world solidarity and to create better international understanding" (104).

In a shrewd move, Center also tied the enforced leisure of the Depression to the Council's long-standing attempt to influence students' reading habits through "recreational reading." In the double-edged reference to both the displacement of workers by modern technology and the unemployment rate at the beginning of her address, Center announced, "Economists tell us that no more in this country will there be work for everyone, eight hours a day, six days a week, on a forty-eight-hour schedule. Some wonder if there will be so much as thirty hours a week for each worker. This state of affairs means increased leisure or unemployment, call non-working time what you will, according to your bank balance" (98). Arguing that the worthy use of leisure was one of the cardinal aims of education, Center pointed out that "the history of the past three years has brought home forcibly to us that we are facing an era when time not occupied by work must be productively occupied, if the integrity of American society is not to be impaired. We have been keenly aware in this country of the value of work, but have we given due consideration to the value of the fine activities of leisure in lifting the level of character?" (103). She stressed that besides affecting taste in radio, theater, and motion pictures—all media for leisure time—English

instruction "will educate young people to rely on reading as the chief resource of their leisure hours" (103).

Center was right about the growth of "leisure" reading. By 1936 her *Home Reading* list, published the second year of the Depression, already had sold 360,000 copies ("National Council," 14). Furthermore, people increased their use of libraries (which the Council had been vigorously supporting), not just to while away the time with escapist fantasies, but for "serious" reading, as they sought to understand political and social issues and to find ways to earn money (Tyack, Lowe, and Hansot 1984, 41).

Stella Center's presidential address presented reading as essential in the wide context of American life. In 1934 she began to make it essential for success in education. In her work for the Reading School of Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx, Center was dedicated to helping children who could not read well, training unemployed graduates and former teachers as auxiliary remedial staff, using the latest scientific educational methods, formulating a philosophy of reading instruction, and struggling to offer reform without completely damning her own profession.

Although city schools took the blows of the Great Depression later than rural schools, by 1932 even teachers in New York feared losing their jobs, and some were in fact put out of work despite the rise in enrollments and retention rates of secondary students (33-38). The Roosevelt administration intervened by hiring men and women on relief to provide or assist with instruction in programs intended to supplement the regular curriculum of the public schools (93-131). Most of the supplemental programs lay in adult education or in preschools and primary schools (131), but Theodore Roosevelt High School did become an early site of a New Deal experiment. The elimination of illiteracy was the government's premiere mission in instruction (131), and at Theodore Roosevelt the Department of English had gathered proof that well over half of the entering students were deficient, or "retarded," readers (Center and Persons 1937, 3-14; Center 1952, 283). Therefore, according to Center, in December 1934 the high school division of the board of education assigned approximately thirty young men and women who were on relief to the Department of English at Theodore Roosevelt, funding them with money from the Civil Works Administration (later to be titled the Works Progress Administration) to provide remedial instruction in reading. The resulting "Reading School," which Center and Persons planned and supervised, was the first project of its kind in New York's public high schools (Center and Persons 1937, v, 15; Center 1952, 283).



Today, visitors coming to Theodore Roosevelt High School move through a medley of Latino accents and signs in Spanish (recalling perhaps the television program "The Bronx Zoo"), but in the 1930s different immigrant populations occupied the neighborhood and poured into this Bronx public school, a school that to Stella Center seemed to be a microcosm of the "new order" in American society. Jews and Italians predominated, although numerous other ethnic groups were also present among the school's 7,000 girls and boys (Center and Persons 1937, 4). Most were not college-bound students but registered in the "commercial course," and for many English was a second language: besides Yiddish and Italian, Center cited home languages of Hungarian, Albanian, Turkish, Armenian, and Russian (19).

During the course of the project, Center and Persons enrolled a total of 500 students in the Reading School, each term basing their selection of students on data about the students' mental ability (through the Terman Group Test of Mental Ability) and reading level (primarily through the Stanford Reading Tests). The students substituted the Reading School class for their regular English instruction. Although the focal activity was reading, the students did write compositions (which Center described as "practically illiterate" at first) and received "instruction in every branch of English" (20). Small class size (no more than five students per teacher, instead of the regular forty or more), individual attention, and homogeneous grouping were three of what were then innovative methods used in the Reading School. The class was conducted as a "studio-laboratory," or workshop, as we would say today.

The premise of the instruction was that all pupils could improve their reading ability if teachers could "galvanize their will to learn" and used the right materials and methods. Center and Persons were again *au courant* in their view of materials and methods. They followed the "types approach" (see Applebee 1974, 56), that is, dividing written material into different types according to purpose; moreover, instead of just the "classics," students also studied "work-type" reading. Teachers were to infer individual students' latent interests in order to suggest books that would attract the students in a stimulating, not escapist, program of leisure reading, considered as essential to progress as the work of the studio-classroom itself. The readings were graded, but potentially difficult vocabulary was not to be perceived as inappropriate—how else would students expand their own vocabularies? Silent reading was stressed because of its efficiency. Visual dysfunctions were to be corrected, ocular mechanics to be understood.



Several graphs and photographs display how important this scientific approach was to the experiment. It was a thoroughly corrective model: the students chosen were those who tested most deficient. Whatever barriers stood in the way were to be recognized and, insofar as possible, remedied: physical disability, cultural dislocation, behavioral disorders, family problems, "faulty habits."

Comprehension was the immediate aim: a series of gradually more difficult and longer passages were set forth programmatically, with score cards for the students to fill out, timing themselves and writing in the answer to the "target," that is, the purpose of the reading. Piqued interest and enjoyment were important, but as means of galvanizing the will to learn, not as ends. Hard work was expected and valued. With patience, practice, and generous guidance from supportive teachers, hard-working pupils were expected to see themselves making progress, thus raising their confidence level as they systematically raised their reading level until they had achieved the ultimate aim of the instruction, an educational aim based on William Heard Kilpatrick's theory of progressive self-direction: "to put the individual in a fair way to traveling under his own power" (Center and Persons 1937, 20, 138).

Following the policy of the federal educational projects, the Reading School had to be supplemental, not integrated into the regular curriculum, and it had to be staffed only by people on relief (Tyack, Lowe, and Hansot 1984, 98-131); therefore, the thirty auxiliary instructors funded by the federal government were the sole teaching staff. Center's description of her staff reveals the effect of the Depression on college graduates: many of these instructors had taught in public and private schools before the Depression; the majority had majored in English, journalism, public speaking, or related subjects, but others had degrees in education, sociology, science, law, French, or German. They were "adaptable" and "interested," but they did not know what methods to use or how to prepare materials, let alone how to diagnose reading problems and write case histories for the sake of the experiment. The solution was a mandatory daily conference of one hour (or staff meeting, we might say now) throughout the entire time of the project, during which hour the staff was able "to set forth the objectives of the work, to discuss methods of teaching, to examine teaching materials, to give instruction in the preparation of teaching materials, to discuss all the problems of the classroom, to keep the fundamental philosophy of the course constantly in the focus of attention, to hear reports of committees, and to create a unity of purpose among the teachers" (Center and Persons 1937, 15). In praise

of a staff that evidently found the experiment's demands daunting, Center stated, "Their greatest contribution to the work has been their attitude toward the boys and girls under instruction; they have established and maintained a spirit of friendliness in the classroom, an indispensable attitude in remedial work" (16).

The formidable organizing power that made Stella Center a successful Council president is evident in the description of bringing the Reading School into reality. Moreover, those of us who hire adjunct faculty in composition these days, or who have retrained retrenched faculty, will appreciate Center's view of her staff, her solution to the problem of their inexpertise, and the value she placed on their attitude in the classroom.

In evaluating the results of the Reading School experiment, Center and Persons came to some harsh conclusions about democratic education, not as an ideal but in its enactment. Seventy-five percent of the students who finished the experiment made progress, but in some cases "not sufficient progress to overcome all retardation"; that is, students raised their reading levels but not always to that appropriate for their grade levels. Insufficiency was especially true for those beginning in the lowest level. Furthermore, Reading School students did not inevitably transfer their gains to their other subjects; despite improvement in reading comprehension, some still did poorly overall. To Center and Persons, these results did not imply that federal funds had been wasted, that the methods of the Reading School were faulty, or that some students did not belong in school. They argued, very much as basic writing teachers argue today, that no concerted effort existed outside the Reading School to enable the transference of power; that traditional English instruction was wholly geared to the college-bound population; that the later remediation begins, the less likely it is to overcome "retardation"; that the Reading School students were the greatest risks of all the students; and that professional services were necessary to ameliorate the remedial students' complex problems. They contended that remediation was not undemocratic, that it belonged in secondary schools if they were to fulfill their mission, that teachers and schools must face their responsibility for their students' failure:

Reduced to its simplest terms, this problem of the retarded pupil who is thrown into water beyond his depth and allowed to sink or swim is a problem in humanity. It is destructive of the self-respect and morale to which every person is entitled, to subject him to repeated failure. If, as so many teachers say, they can do nothing for the low-ability groups, then it is scarcely honest to open the

school doors to them and make the gesture of offering education. It is extremely wasteful in time and energy and that commodity called the taxpayer's money. The efforts of these boys and girls to measure up to the impossible ought to be a challenge to their teachers to solve the vexing problem of what to give them and how to give it. The larger measure of failure is on the side of the teacher and the school. (91)

Reflecting a long-term trend of increased retention in high school and not just the dim prospect of finding work during the mid-1930s, Roosevelt High School had in all four of its grades pupils who might earlier have dropped out. In general, there were more students in high schools and more older students. As Center and Persons extended their testing (with the Iowa Silent Reading Test) to the whole student body at Roosevelt, it became apparent to them that students who could not read at their grade level were being passed along from junior to senior high school and graduating from high school. According to their data, 64 percent of the first-term entrants were deficient in reading skill, "large percentages" of students in each grade were performing below the norm, and 38 percent of the graduating class "were below standard" (14). To Center, these findings meant not only that something was wrong with English instruction, but that the schools were allowing students to graduate even though they could not read well enough to learn the material that they were supposed to have been taught. The view that public schools have become largely a holding place for youth, rather than an educative place, is very much with us today.

Center and Persons's *Teaching High-School Students to Read* presents a remarkable chapter in the history of English. Although it has not become a landmark study, it ought to be paired with Mina P. Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* (1977) as two compassionate, yet disciplined, heroic accounts of English teaching during periods of enormous cultural stress in the United States.

At the end of the federal experiment at Theodore Roosevelt High School, Center and Persons took their methods and commitment to New York University, opening a Reading Clinic in the Division of General Education. The clinic (eventually renamed the Reading Institute) was meant to be a pilot program, but lasted for fifteen years. Among its divisions was a Reading School, consisting of a Lower School for school-age children and an Upper School for young adults (aged fifteen to twenty-five). As with the federal project at Roosevelt, Center and Persons grounded their methods in science and the psychology of learning (using Rorschach tests and the Thematic

Apperception Test, for example, and even recommending consultations with endocrinologists) and their approach in the conviction that “children are entitled to develop within the framework of their inalienable rights”—that is, whether a superior student or an inferior student, whether physically or emotionally troubled or not, a child lived “in a literate civilization, and the obligation to read rested on him heavily. And the obligation to teach him to read rested on his teacher” (Center 1952, 293).

In Center’s retrospective account of the Reading Clinic, which she codirected with Persons, and the Reading School, where for fifteen years she supervised teachers and taught in the evening program for adults, it is clear that her faith in the educability of all children and the preeminence she gave to reading never wavered:

Most of the difficulties and complications that children endure could be avoided. That observation may seem platitudinous, but so much is at stake it can not be repeated too often if the repetition could bring about action that might lessen the woes of childhood. The welfare of children is determined largely by the intelligence and unselfish affection of parents, and by the professional skill and generous service of the teaching profession. . . . It is a fortunate thing that attention today is centered on reading, but . . . a teacher of reading must be concerned with everything that concerns a child—his physical well-being, his intellectual development, his emotional maturity, his social relationships, and his moral sense . . . . The Reading Clinic with its various services was designed to be a pilot institution, to demonstrate that what was done for a small group of students should in time be done for all boys and girls, if they are to achieve their complete maturity. Perhaps when the country awakens to the realization that children are its most valuable asset, barring none, perhaps funds for their needs will be provided, even though it means spending less on what is useless and destructive. (298)

The asperity with which Center criticized government spending and the compassion she had for children must appeal to us in our time.

On the other hand, Stella Center’s reliance on IQ tests and other scientific methods (the endocrine treatments may remind us of the Ritalin prescribed in more recent days to quell hyperactivity) and such photographs as students practicing “rhythmical eye movements” may disturb some of us today. However, we should remember that progressive teachers of the 1920s–30s welcomed science. The “mis-measure of man,” as Stephen Gould was to say, had yet to be perceived. In general, Center seems to have been an early and lasting enthusiast of technology and advances in scientific knowledge: in her presidential address of 1932 she even forecast optimistically the

advent of television (and so it is fitting that television brought her the moonwalk just before her death). In her 1947 report titled "The Council's Awareness of Reading," she pointed out that besides long-standing concern for the aesthetics of reading, for motivating people to read, and for comprehension, the NCTE convention was seeing a new interest in physiological, psychological, and even psychiatric aspects of reading, such as the relation of vision to reading efficiency and emotional blocking, which was proof, Center declared, that the Council was seeking a scientific basis for sound procedures in teaching basic reading skills (142). It seems likely that Center would be fascinated by our recent research on writing and reading anxiety, including the use of protocols (see, for instance, Rose 1985 and Selfe 1986), and by the various uses to which both learning-disabled and all other students may put computers.

The current feminist impetus in English has made us sensitive to gender-related topics in our research and classrooms. Center's work indicated her sensitivity to one topic still of interest. Although she discussed both boys and girls at Roosevelt High School, the bulk of the data, including the case studies, had to do with boys. The frontispiece to *Teaching High School Students to Read* also depicted a boy reading. Although *Practices in Reading and Thinking* was addressed to girls and boys, the chief examples of why we must read and the "true story," complete with photograph and reading graphs, were of boys. We may infer that the majority of the problem readers Center saw were boys, not girls. Indeed, in her account of the Reading Institute at New York University, she confirmed this fact and attempted to explain it: "The Clinic had a preponderance of boys; yet that fact must not be construed as a reflection on their intelligence. . . . In the United States, boys are subjected to a great deal of pressure by their parents, a procedure that often defeats itself. Boys have more sensitiveness than they are usually credited with having" (Center 1952, 285-86). In Center's day, secondary schoolteachers did have a new population of older boys in their classrooms, for more boys were going to secondary school than in the past (see Scharf 1980, 72). In noting that boys had more difficulty with reading than girls did, Center voiced an observation made by others as well, both earlier and later and even today (see Segel 1986). Why females seem to be better at reading, and at English in general, is a topic, or as Ann Fausto-Sterling would say, a myth, about gender of importance to us now, when the image of English as a "feminine" subject is being reinforced by the increasing proportion of women not only majoring in English and teaching writing but receiving doctoral degrees as well.

During the first four decades of the twentieth century, of course, the interest in the academic performance of boys and young men was bound up with larger issues of gender, prestige, and money: belief in the ill effects women's tutelage had on male development, desire to raise the status of the teaching profession by diminishing its association with women, and preference in a time of job scarcity and retrenchment for hiring and retaining men rather than women, be those women married or single. Today our emphasis is on enhancing the status of women. We are newly concerned, for instance, with pay equity, appropriate role models, and such problems as managing a career along with a marriage. As we review the history of our predecessors in English, we will do well to remember that when Stella Stewart Center entered her profession, a female career teacher not only was routinely paid less than a male teacher for comparable work but was expected to remain single. In 1920, 90 percent of female teachers were single; in 1930 the figure was 80 percent (Scharf 1980, 75). Yet although women teachers were supposed to be single (in some states, the contracts demanded this condition), a prevalent image of the spinster schoolteacher was derogatory precisely because she had not married. Married women made their inroads in the midst of arguments at the expense of their unwed sisters: it was "normal" for women to marry, and it was a normal woman who was wanted in the classroom, not a twisted old maid deprived of sexual and maternal fulfillment (see Scharf 1980, 79-83). Under such a conception of the female gender, it cannot have been easy for a single woman in the 1930s to have held on to her dignity and self-esteem, let alone to her job.

Stella Center, a single woman, does not give us many images of herself in her publications. Only through Barbara Sullivan's story in the *Tift College Bulletin* do we see a woman who frequently traveled abroad, collected and inherited antiques and art, lived in graciousness, and enjoyed visits with long-term women friends. However, Center's view of what teachers should be is abundantly evident. The classroom was a place of work: "The atmosphere of the Clinic was serious and at the same time cheerful. Everybody worked and demonstrated daily the therapeutic value of work. There was no sentimentality; there was no coddling; work was assigned and work was done" (Center 1952, 293). Teachers were responsible, along with parents, for the welfare of children and were to be concerned with "everything that concerns a child," but teachers were not ersatz parents; they had "professional skill" and gave "generous service" (298). That Center valued her work and her colleagues is clear in this rare autobiographical moment in her retrospective account of the Reading Institute:



The fifteen years I spent as director of the Reading Clinic and the Reading School of New York University telescoped into a brief span experiences that represented chronologically many times that number of years. It would be dishonest to claim a record of uniform successes. The work was difficult, the hours usually twice as long as a normal working day; the schedule permitted few vacations or holidays; the demands on my sympathy and emotions were at times excessive; yet perspective prompts me to express gratitude that I had an experience allowed few teachers. I recall with appreciation those members of my staff who were steadfast in their belief in young people's possibilities and who cheerfully undertook the seemingly impossible, assured that the impossible is often surprisingly possible where young people are concerned. (291-92)

Perspective prompts us to reflect on Center's professionalism in a time when women's work was blatantly devalued and spinster teachers were cruelly mocked.

Stella Center's work for NCTE included significant initiatives in publication. Through a letter-writing campaign, she herself raised the funds to make possible the publication of Sterling Leonard's *Current English Usage* (Smith and Squire n.d., 15). This fund-raising marked a shift in policy that Center engineered. Instead of distributing free copies of publications to members, an act that prohibited the publication of anything lengthy, under Center's initiative the Council negotiated a contract with an outside publisher for commercial distribution; Council publications then became available for a price (15). This new publication policy allowed more extensive publication and brought revenue to the Council.

Furthermore, as Council president, Center defended, on radio and in the newspaper, the perspective on language that Leonard's study promoted ("Usage Study," 160-61; "Current Usage," 594). Its view of language was in step with her own modernity. She welcomed the automobile, the talking picture, and the radio, for instance, because she believed humans could and should put machines to good use in building a community: "Our teaching of correct usage must recognize the influence of the language practices of the travelling majority, touring this continent and converting it into one vast neighborhood" (Center 1933, 101). Language was part of her vision of the United States: "If the social unification of America is to be accomplished, it must be done by travelers who are articulate and who can communicate effectively. The chief instrument of social adjustment and integration is the language of the group used acceptably" (101).

The social integration of minorities such as Jews, Italians, and other recent immigrants from Europe was, as demonstrated by Center's work at Theodore Roosevelt High School, a challenge she tried to meet. Whether she ever worked directly with black students and teachers goes unmentioned. Center did, however, preside at the first NCTE annual convention in which racial segregation became an issue and not just a fact. Although the details of the decision are not clear, in the unpublished account of the 1932 Memphis convention by Dora V. Smith (who was there) and James Squire, once Center was alerted to the "local mores," that is, Jim Crow laws that prevented blacks from entering a hotel for whites, as the convention hotel was, Center's solution was to invite black teachers "in the area to hold a separate meeting and to select any four of the regular convention speakers that they would like to hear" (Smith and Squire, 6). With our present-day consciousness of the history of black and white race relations in the United States, we may indeed feel troubled by the spectacle of segregated teachers listening, separate and unequal, to Center's call for teachers to become "responsive to the forces that dignify human life and contribut[e] to the social progress of a world changing, we hope, for the better" (Center 1933, 108) and her charge to teachers to direct "the forces and trends in contemporary American life" and not to live "remote in academic seclusion, preoccupied with traditions only" (107).

Incomplete though her vision of social unification in America's "vast neighborhood" may have been, Center did believe firmly in the principle of a "cross-section of American society" in the classroom (see Center and Persons 1937, 3; Center 1952, 298). Throughout her work on reading, she made it quite clear that however difficult English instruction had become and however complex the problem of eradicating illiteracy might be, English teachers were failing to use methods and materials that would increase the chances of the less-able students to develop their ability to read and therefore to become educated. The force of Center's reiterated pronouncements suggests strongly that she was at odds with others in her profession whose philosophy of learning was not based on Center's work ethic. She was at odds, too, with those who did not share her view of how the teacher could fulfill the purpose of enabling students to "proceed under their own power," a phrase and its variants repeated often in her writing: "The amount of reading retardation in schools, colleges, and universities has slowed up learning and resulted in a policy of educational appeasement to be deplored . . . . It is unfortunate that 'Reading is fun' was for many years the slogan of the schools. The implication of the slogan ignores the fact

that reading is an art whose mastery requires patient practice and study and analysis" (280–81). For Center, a child became self-reliant and successful in school, leisure, and employment by developing the ability to comprehend different kinds of discourse, to think and judge, to converse about issues. It was an ability to be developed as a skill and set of habits. Reading is thinking, she said again and again. Today, as we emphasize the other half of verbal literacy, "writing is thinking" is the more familiar cry, and the argument is against reducing literacy to a set of skills, to practice in Standard Written English. Center would agree: she wanted a "correlated" curriculum in which spelling and punctuation, for instance, were important, not as isolated skills but as aspects of reading as it converged with writing.

Of all the convictions that made up Stella Stewart Center's philosophy of English teaching, one that may seem so obvious that we neglect to attend to its implications is this: "The point which is dazzlingly clear in the whole problem is that the high school has found no way to educate the boys and girls who cannot read" (Center and Persons 1937, 90). The materials of education require one to read; therefore, unless schools change the vehicle of instruction to a nonliterate medium, to become educated in school and college, one must be a competent reader. Today, particularly in the colleges, we may speak about being "invented by the university" (see Bartholomae 1985; Bartholomae and Petrosky 1986), that is, learning the ideational and rhetorical conventions of academic discourse in order to become members of its "interpretive community." This is an epistemological theory different from Center's view of learning to comprehend the purpose of different types of readings. Nevertheless, there is a point of agreement in the two convictions not shared by expressionist schools of thought: those who cannot participate in the discourse of school are forever excluded from the power its discourse brings.

Today, when long-standing racism and new waves of immigrants challenge the attitudes and resources of our public schools and institutions of higher education, when in some states English teachers cannot find jobs and college writing programs hire masses of underpaid adjuncts, when the "functional illiteracy" of high school graduates, athletes, and a whole underclass of workers is the subject of public service advertising, when elitist education is more elite than ever, when drug dealing has surpassed gum chewing as a common problem, when universities have large remedial reading and writing programs that by state mandate give no credit, when women continue to do devalued "women's work"—today, Stella Stewart Center's work on reading is more than a dated piece of history. It is a reminder that

our foremothers in English studies have long labored hard to realize a school for the people and to foster a sense of dignity in the profession of teaching. It is unending labor.

And with all due respect to the forefathers of English, it is the foremothers whose chapters must be witnessed by teachers of reading and writing today, whether professors in English departments or in English education programs or secondary school teachers or aspirants to the teaching profession. For throughout the twentieth century, women have dominated the field of schoolteaching, and they have come to dominate college composition. Most of what these women do is ephemeral; it lies, for good or for ill, in the practices of the classroom, sometimes remembered, always influential in one way or another, but transitory and unrecorded. We cannot read their chapters. Stella Stewart Center's publications and records allow us to recognize her leadership, her talent for organization, her philosophy of learning, her methods, her contribution to the efforts of the National Council of Teachers of English. They also give us a glimpse of her teaching. For although the two photographs that show Stella Center seated alone in repose, reading, are indeed fitting bookends for the career of a woman dedicated to the value of reading, her full significance to us may be brought out by another image, this one a verbal description by Eleanor Baykin, a journalist who had been Center's student as well as a Reading Institute teacher under her supervision: "As a teacher, Dr. Center was an electric current. I shall never forget hearing her give a lesson to some slow readers on a paragraph in her book, *Experiences in Reading and Thinking*, describing a nail-making machine. She made the production of the stream of bright nails an exciting event. A brilliant and distinguished woman" (1969). Nails, not Shakespeare; "slow" readers, not honors students; but "electrical" all the same to those students and the teachers she trained. In practice as well as in theory, Stella Stewart Center taught students "the art of reading so that they can proceed under their own power to acquire an education" (Center 1952, xix). As we learn to read her history, so may she teach us.

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