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Nicole Sieben

*SUNY College at Old Westbury*, siebenn@oldwestbury.edu

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## Critical Pedagogy

# Advocating for the Affective: Writing Hope into School Spaces

NICOLE SIEBEN

### Affective Advocacy

Several scholars in the field of English education advocate for student voice and emotion to take precedence in our English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Through the acknowledgment, appreciation, and affirmation of the multiple dimensions of each student experience, we can create space in our English classrooms for students to engage in the critical work of affective excavation and self-expression. In her work on the role of affective influences in English education, Richmond (2002) argues how critical it is to consider the ways emotions play a role in the process of writing and the teaching of writing. Similarly, LaMay (2016) supports the idea that if we can bring “the personal” into our ELA classrooms, we can help students to see the relevance of school, not just as a place to gather knowledge for school tasks, but also as a place to grow as people whose stories matter in the world. Because emotions are inextricably tied to learning processes (Smagorinsky, 2017), we know we cannot effectively teach English language arts unless we consider the affective components of our students’ educational experiences.

When students are given opportunities to access the deepest parts of themselves, they can then begin to unpack their full potentials as critical readers, writers, and thinkers in the world. As Smagorinsky (2017) argues, in education our human “investment of time, affect, and dedicated effort can’t come without recognizing the emotional dimensions” present in the work that we do with our students. Exploring the feelings that accompany students’ experiences in life through writing exercises and critical readings of mentor texts allows students to contribute important personal narratives to conversations (LaMay, 2016) that need to take place in schools and society. Richmond (2002) notes, “emotions are part of the human experience and, thus, should be regarded as important components of learning” (p. 67). In working with secondary school and college students, I have seen learning benefits maximized when we allow emotion to play a role

in the conversations we have about reading and writing processes with our students and teachers. Because of these experiences, I have come to view myself as another advocate for the affective components of an English language arts education. Thus, this article provides frameworks and strategies for teaching and learning with affective advocacy consciousness in the ELA classroom.

### My Positionality as a Teacher-Researcher in the Affective Domain

As a former secondary school ELA teacher and English teacher educator at present, my current research explores hope within the field of English language arts, specifically as it relates to writing. Though hope has been defined in a variety of ways across educational contexts, my research over the past seven years with secondary and postsecondary school students (and their teachers) has examined the development of writing skills through a hope theory that is defined in positive psychology as the will (motivation) and the ways (strategies) to accomplish future goals (Snyder, 2000). By conducting interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, surveys, and artifact analyses situated within English classrooms at the middle school, high school, and college levels, I have found that hope plays a significant role in building students’ writing capabilities and positive affects towards writing and reading (Sieben, 2013, 2018). By examining my own teaching practices and interviewing secondary school ELA teachers who have engaged with this work over time, I have gained valuable insight about the role hope-focused strategies can play in ELA classrooms. As a teacher-researcher, it has been worthwhile to consider the ways we can implement hope discourses and practices in ELA classrooms in order to build students’ unique strengths and acknowledge that affect matters in the work we do together.

Further, hope operates within domain-specific contexts. As several past studies have shown, a person can be more hopeful about one aspect of his/her/per life and less hope-

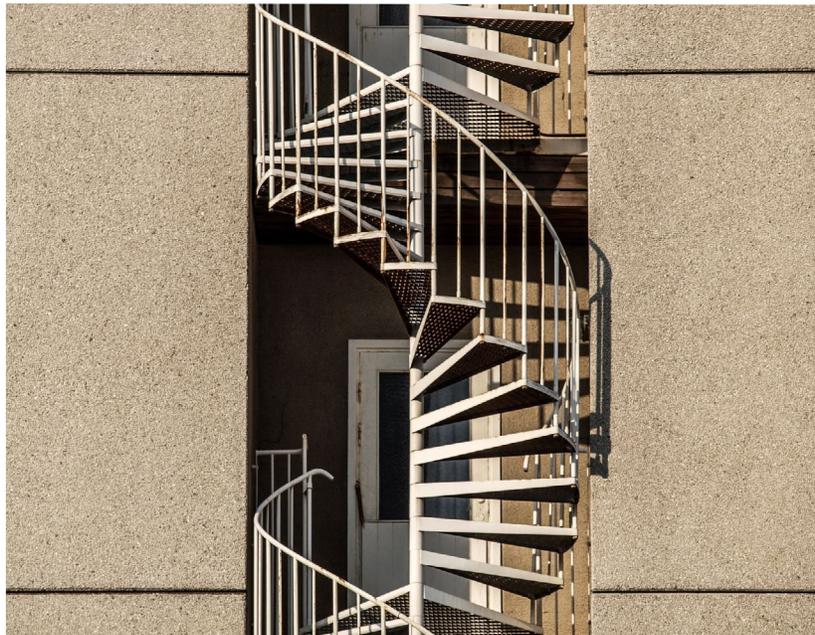
ful about another (Snyder, 2000). The same is true in academic contexts: for example, students may be more hopeful about their ability to be successful in science courses and less hopeful about their capabilities in ELA classes; they may also be more hopeful about athletic goals and less hopeful about academic goals or life goals. Contexts matter when considering how to build hope into classroom communities, and affect plays a role in the ways we integrate this work. Within English education and the unique climates of our classroom spaces, we must consider the domain-specificity of hope too when designing and implementing curricula. Thus, the suggested classroom activities below can and should be adjusted based on the needs and interests of the learners in each class.

### Writing Hope in School Spaces

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, my work in the cognitive-motivational domain has led to the theorization of a concept called “writing hope” (Sieben, 2013), which includes an affective component worth examining in our advocacy of emotions in English education. Since general hope is the will (the affect) and the ways (the strategies knowledge) to accomplish worthwhile goals (Snyder, 2000), writing hope is the emotional motivation (the will) to use writing strategies (the ways) to accomplish worthwhile writing goals set by students (with guidance from teachers and other writing mentors). Through both the quantitative statistical analyses and qualitative case studies in English language arts classrooms, writing hope has emerged as a valid, strengths-based approach to teaching both hope and writing as it builds writing motivations and competencies in secondary school (and college) students (Sieben, 2013, 2016, 2018). This framework of writing hope has been helpful in my teaching of writing skills to students because it considers cognitive-motivational components to success, and

it allows for the affective component of the writer to influence the teaching and learning of writing processes for school and for life (Sieben, 2018). At the intersection of positive psychology and English education, writing hope as a theory and an educational framework shows us that in places where emotional motivation is present, authenticity and competency in writing is more likely to follow.

Since positive psychologists have found that emotion does much of the work in building hope in students across multiple domains of life (Lopez, 2013; Snyder, 2000), as teachers we can work with students to access these emotions and motivate strategy use that will help students to reach meaningful, self-determined goals inside and outside of the classroom. While hope can help improve writing and reading competencies, it can also do something perhaps even more im-



*Architecture by Pixabay artist zephylwer0*

portant for our students: it can build hope into their lives where it may be lacking (Sieben, 2018). It can help our students to imagine scenarios in which they could feel happy or fulfilled, when perhaps they are not, and with support, students can write their ideas into existence. Hope gives students ways of writing plans for a better future, what-

ever that means for them. Sometimes students have the strategies (i.e., hope pathways) to do so already in their toolbox of skills, and sometimes they have the motivation (i.e., hope agency) to use and/or learn the strategies needed to do so. As ELA teachers within a discipline that is often focused on building hope, we can access each student’s unique strengths and bring them to and through a journey of hope that may seem unlikely for some students in their present circumstances. With hope, “our students can survive devastating tragedies that have the potential to cripple them” (Sieben, 2018, p. xxiv), and we can facilitate this critical path in meaningful ways in our classrooms.

## Processing Difficult Emotions through Structured Frameworks

Though the students in our classrooms may seem young in years, they may not be so in experiences. As recent tragic events in schools have evidenced (e.g., Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School), students may see (either close up or at a distance) horrors befall their peers, friends, and family members and are left to process all of the emotions in the aftermath. If we fail to pay attention to the emotions present in our students, then we miss opportunities to build hope where perhaps it is most needed. In these moments, ELA teachers can create critical spaces for healing, self-expression and discovery. While it is important to note that ELA teachers cannot be expected to process these difficult emotions with students in the same ways licensed clinical psychologists and social workers would, ELA teachers can still create conversation spaces for emotions to be expressed and discussed without placing restrictions on student voices and the multiplicity of emotions they are experiencing. In many ways, creating opportunities for students to be seen and heard can be just as powerful in healing and validating the human experience.

Students can learn to survive and even thrive through hardships that might otherwise cripple them when collectively there is a context of hope in the classroom and broader school community. Although psychological perspectives can often be quite personal and individual in nature, teachers can develop ways of working with students in the classroom that support each student's affect about writing, reading, and emotional processing. By establishing their classrooms as supportive educational settings (Bandura, 1986, 2001), teachers can provide contexts for moments of growth, healing, and self-expression to occur. For example, if students feel devastating losses, anxieties, or fears, they may be better able to process these incidents by writing through their emotions, reconstructing meaning in their writing (Neimeyer, 1999), and reading mentor texts that speak to these experiences. Strengthening certain beliefs about their ability to engage these skills in ELA classrooms and in life can help students to survive tragic events and to thrive in successful times. When we are aware of which traits (i.e., hope) to cultivate in our students to build strength, we can use intentional, instructional heuristics to provide students with the tools necessary to inform their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. By writing *with* their feelings, and not apart from them, students

can develop writing skills necessary for academic competencies and for survival in grief and other moments in life that trigger difficult emotions (LaMay, 2016). In accordance with research that supports the use of structured writing experiences to cope with loss, disappointment, heartbreak, and/or fear (Neimeyer, 1999); certain guidelines for writing and discussion could be created and followed within a supportive framework—like the *Writing Hope Framework* (Sieben, 2018) or a vicarious learning experiences framework (Bandura, 1986)—in order for students to process emotions in ways that can help them to reconstruct meaning and foster hope for the future.

## Collective Hope in the ELA Classroom: Vicarious Experiences

Research in positive psychology also reveals that students learn through the vicarious experiences of models, especially through models that are in contexts and situations similar to theirs (Bandura, 1986, 2001). According to Bandura's (1986) work, vicarious learning includes students witnessing the success of models performing a desired skill or task. Through the observation of diverse examples of emotional coping processes (e.g., grief), students can vicariously learn characteristics of hope-driven problem-solving and decision-making. When students learn through vicarious educational experiences in ELA classrooms, they are given the opportunity to examine emotions from an "outside" perspective and develop "inside" affectively as perhaps more hopeful, empathetic, socially just human beings with rounder understandings of the human experience, which can lead to survival and success despite hardship and loss.

Through the reading of various canonical and young adult works of literature where death and other forms of loss that trigger strong emotions are present, students witness unique grieving experiences they can learn from. For example, in Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students read about Janie who survives multiple losses in her life (e.g., deaths of family members, losses of wealth, independence, and social status), and this can help students gain insight into feelings of despair, loss, sadness, optimism, and hope. Other literary works that contain narratives of grief and loss include, but are not limited to:

- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis

- *The Boy in the Black Suit* by Jason Reynolds
- *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion
- *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy
- *Final Payments* by Mary Gordon
- *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and Healing* (an anthology of modern poems on grief) edited by Kevin Young
- *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White
- *Call Me By Your Name* by Andre Aciman

In reality, a vast majority of canonical and young adult novels include themes of hope, grief, loss, and struggle that can be explored using the strategies below.

Text-to-self connections prompted by ELA teachers through the intentional use of freewrites, literature circle groups, and dialogic journals can provide students with reading-writing spaces that explore how emotions triggered by grief can be shifted or affirmed (or something entirely different) based on character stories. Making the cause and effect link between students' vicarious experiences and future actions can be challenging for students to see on their own; therefore, teachers can facilitate conversations that demonstrate the application of lessons learned. For example, one activity that I have worked through with students uses a "brainstorm and cluster" structure. As a class, we analyze the various ways characters in novels navigate their turmoil using this literacy strategy. I ask students to first list individually all the ways they observed the characters attempting to address the painful emotions they were experiencing in the world of the novel. Then, in literature circle groups students compile their lists and write each individual strategy used by a character on its own Post-it. Next, students categorize the Post-it notes by theme using a group-defined system (e.g., based on solutions or degrees of success in coping/hoping) and cluster the Post-it notes together accordingly. Then groups create headings for each category and discuss how each category of Post-it notes can provide one or more pathways for coping. Once pathways are determined, each group shares their findings of possible pathways with the class. Finally, I facilitate a student-centered discussion with the class about which problem-solving strategies seem to be the most effective in getting the character through emotional distress and to emotional satisfaction, noting that one "best" strategy does not necessarily exist and that ultimately we need to each decide what works "best for us" within our own individual contexts and circumstances.

Novels such as Hurston's and others', are examples of stories that can help students witness the pain of loss without having to experience it firsthand. Using an activity like "brainstorm and cluster" can help teachers to navigate this process of transferring vicarious experiences to future actions. This activity allows students to be equipped with tools for survival when they do find themselves face-to-face with grief-filled emotions that may or may not be expected. Moreover, those students who have already experienced personal loss may find an ally in such works of literature that can speak to the feelings of loss students may be experiencing in their lives. Grieving students need these works of literature in order to feel less alone in their emotional responses, and they may need to witness the strategies others employ in order to survive their own trials with grief. Sometimes the coping strategies characters use can be challenging for students to deduce on their own, so as ELA teachers we can facilitate these processes using activities such as the one detailed above and honor where students are emerging from in their own lives when they make connections.

Through the use of intentional hope-focused prompts, we can encourage students to find and write about these coping devices found in texts and garner pathways and strength from stories of survival. For example, literature that addresses processes of grieving can be the anchor texts for questions that are created with the cognitive (pathways) and affective (agency) components of the Writing Hope Framework (WHF) in mind. Questions written within the WHF that I have used in ELA classrooms for vicarious learning purposes include:

- a) In what ways did this character react to the devastation/loss he/she/ze experienced?
- b) What emotions did the grieving character(s) display to other characters? What emotions did the grieving character(s) reveal to readers? If there is a distinct difference, what inferences can you make about the choice to have a private and public self during the grieving process?
- c) How did other characters react to the grieving character's actions/responses? To what degree were empathy and compassion expressed to the griever?
- d) What motivations did the grieving character find to inspire a desire to survive the devastation/loss? Were these internal (i.e., coming from the self) or external (i.e., coming from others) motivations? Which were most inspiring for the griever?
- e) What pathways/strategies did the grieving character employ to cope with grief? Which pathways proved to be most effective? Why do you think these strategies worked for this character?

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f) What coping strategies will you apply to your own grieving processes to help you find hope during hard times? How might you choose to help others who are grieving in order to support them in their unique processes?

g) In times when you may find yourself in grief, what goals will you set for yourself? How will you work towards achieving these goals?

h) How has your understanding of grief (and the emotions connected to it) been altered or confirmed based on your reading of this work?

In my classroom, I have used these questions in a variety of ways. One method I have employed is to simply have students freewrite to such questions by giving them timed intervals in class to respond to each (or only certain) prompt(s). This sort of “focused freewriting” (Elbow, 2010) requires students to write within the parameters of specific prompts that guide students to write about the topic of grief (or another chosen topic) through a very intentional languaging that places emphasis on finding strategic pathways and affective motivations for navigating grief through a hope framework (Sieben, 2018; Snyder, 2000). Student responses about literature and their own lives thus engender narratives that contain principles of hope that are then able to be discussed in groups or as a class or a combination of both. Using a small group conversation approach, students then form literature circles that I have called “writing experience groups,” or something more specific to the conversation topic like “grief experience groups.” In these conversation groups, students share their freewrites and capitalize on their vicarious experiences of different emotions grounded in the discussion of novels and real life. During group discussions, I circulate amongst groups, listen to what students share, and contribute to conversations when it is appropriate for me to do so. Sitting alongside my students, we build hope in these conversation spaces together.

Another way to use the above list of questions is to employ them as a during-reading strategy for which students use these framing questions as a guide and focus in on these emotions while reading a novel. Students can be encouraged to respond to these questions in a dialogic journal (i.e., pairing quotes from the text with personal reactions) while they are reading an assigned or chosen work of literature, and then bring their written ideas to an after-reading activity that allows students to share detailed ideas within the context of the work of literature selected. By linking a during-reading activity to an after-reading activity, students have a chance to consider these topics and work through these vicarious emotions for an extended period of time while they are reading

and then test out their thoughts in a conversation space when they meet in “grief experience groups” to process what they learned and felt. In groups, students can then decide what product/project to create that other classmates/schoolmates can learn from and build hope from. Ultimately, students can learn to borrow from the “collective hope” (Sieben, 2013) of others’ stories until they can claim their own.

Finally, while therapeutic aims (e.g., healing, support, affirmation) may situate this work, the goal of this work is not to provide structured therapy for those in need. However, just as resources would be provided when teaching any topic that might elicit an emotional response from students, resources can also be provided (during vicarious experience workshops) to students looking for additional outlets that may assist in healing processes. As such, teachers can provide phone numbers and contact information for support groups, helplines, and therapy centers as well as additional literature for students to read through. Bringing a topic like grief into conversation in the classroom is perhaps just a starting point to letting students know that their emotional investments matter and that there is a space in our classrooms for students’ authentic experiences (of grief and other difficulties) to be present. All too often, students share that positivity platitudes attempt to cover up and brush away other people’s pain, which hurts those who are suffering more times than it helps. Students acknowledge that this goal is often well-intended: they know people do not want them to feel sad, so they try to make them feel better using the tools and knowledge that they have to do so. But one of the tools that we have as teachers is the ability to provide a classroom space for authentic sharing, acknowledging hard times, honoring “happy times,” and allowing the organic growth of hope to emerge. If we let students define how they would like to process their emotions instead of directing them towards agendas of positivity and performance, we give students the chance to develop the life-affirming skill of self-determination, which they can use to decide what “authentic processing” means to them. As Miller (2015) indicates, self-determination gives students “the right to make choices to self-identify in a way that authenticates one’s self-expression” and it “rejects an imposition to be externally controlled, defined, or regulated” (p. 38). When we allow students a space to grieve, to write through their pain, to allow the uneasy emotions of struggle to emerge, and to acknowledge them in their unique journeys as *humans being*, we allow important parts of the healing process to occur because we validate students’ self-defined experiences instead of forcing them to commit to an experience that is perhaps

externally imposed. Giving students a place to be seen is one way to write hope into classroom spaces, and it is one way that I choose to commit to an advocacy of the affective in my teaching.

## High School Students Inspire Hope

During implementation of the above activities, students I have worked with have shared a variety of findings and emotions. One critical conversation necessary to note was the way in which a group of high school students complicated the notion of what it means to experience grief. A number of students shared they had lost friends and family members who they now grieve and feel deeply sad about on a daily basis, and other students explained that grief can be about more than “just death” but can also be about a loss of status or a change in lifestyle or comfort with the self, which they emphasized was also emotionally triggering to live through as well. These responses sparked a conversation about the need to complicate the notion of grief to extend beyond the idea of it being only about loss of life, but instead should also include loss of any kind, be it a pet, an idea, a social status, or otherwise.

Profoundly, one student in a class of seniors responded to prompt (f) above (i.e., *What coping strategies will/do you apply to your own grieving processes to help you find hope during hard times?*) in a way that gave me pause for reflection then, and eight years later gave me a coping mechanism for dealing with grief in my own life. This student wrote:

*“I write every night before I go to bed. I write for myself and for my grandmother who passed away who I was really close to. I write to keep our conversations going and to keep her influence alive in my life. I write to tell her story. I write to continue our story. I keep a journal that I write in each night, but it’s not a typical journal like other people write ‘Dear Diary’ in or something like that. I write my journal, ‘Dear Grandma’ and have a conversation with my grandmother who is no longer alive. I was very close to her when she was living, and I want to stay close to her even though she isn’t here anymore.”*

I always appreciate reading authentic reasons my students share for their writing practices, and this reason was not only affectively motivated, it was also hopeful. It was life-saving and life-affirming for her and for others, including me. This high school student’s coping strategy of writing letters through grief provided a vicarious learning experience for her classmates and inspired a life-saving and life-affirming

presence in my own professional and personal writing explorations of grief too. Through this student’s eyes, I saw how important it is to keep asking the hard questions that some students may find challenging to consider. Helping students navigate through tough feelings may not seem like a critical component of the literacy skills that we teach in our English language arts classrooms, but it pays dividends in our students’ lives when we do teach the “how of hope” as a key literacy skill for survival. As advocates of the affective work that we do as teachers, our students show us moment by moment how valuable it is to teach with their feelings in mind and their hearts at the center of what we do.

## Writing Hope for Survival

In my own life, Snyder’s (2000) hope theory has taught me about the importance of advocating for the validation of the affective components of our identities inside and outside of the classroom. Hope theory has become a framework within which I see the world as a teacher, a learner, a writer, and a hopeful human. Prior to the sudden death of my father in 2014, I had been researching principles of hope and felt confident I understood the main principles of the theory; however, through this tragic event in my life and the emotions tied to it, I learned a new component of hope I had not understood before—that raw emotions need to be acknowledged and channeled in meaningful ways before movement towards hope can take place. I learned through my own struggles with grief that hope can be harder to develop when there are fewer traces of hope to be found in a person’s life circumstances. As an educator, I now realize that when hopelessness is a main component of the “big picture” mural of a student’s life, it may feel impossible to reclaim a hope that has been lost or to build a hope that never existed in the first place. Knowing that some of our students may feel this way, as ELA teachers we can look to use vicarious learning experiences and/or a writing hope approach in the classroom to show students that hope is possible and there are pathways to this possibility.

As many of my students have shared through critical conversations about literature and life, in the “hopeless” moments, guided writing and critical reading practices that validate their emotions can save lives. Through vicarious learning experiences (i.e., reading literature about loss and survival and then writing about their interactions with these texts), students can recover lost hope once again by creating it into existence. By writing about struggle through a hope theory framework (Sieben, 2018; Snyder, 2000), students can be-

lieve in a future where hope exists because they have taken the time to tend to their feelings and decide on the steps to take in order to make hope a reality: they can use coping strategies learned in literature and in the classroom, feel driven to accomplish academic and life goals they are most motivated to pursue, and face challenges with tenacity knowing that loss and struggle may be a part of the journey but are not necessarily a part of the destination. Engaging in critical reading and writing with hope in mind helps students navigate through emotional struggles, and it gives them a space and a language for doing so. And while I encourage students to share when they feel motivated to do so, I also always remind students that they have a choice as to whether or not and to what degree they excavate their emotions in our ELA classroom. They always have a choice to bring their personal opinions and feelings into the conversation explicitly or to keep their comments grounded in the texts while maintaining the privacy of their emotions. This element of choice is also important to communicate in all of the aforementioned activities in order to enable all students to feel safe in the community learning space created.

Alongside my students, writing hope is currently how I have learned to navigate through the messy emotions in life and survive my own losses; I am engaging with texts that enrich my understandings about what it means to be a griever who is continuously evolving and learning, and I am writing the hope into my life that feels missing. I'm keeping memories, conversations, and love alive with my father by writing in my own nightly journal written as a series of letters to him; I'm holding onto words that have meaning to me; and I'm building a commitment to myself to say whatever it is I need to say in writing so that I can think through the pain that I feel. I see myself in these words and in doing so have established a new relationship with writing, critical reading, and advocacy over the past four years that reinforces how much I need all three in my life. Through my work with students and colleagues in education, I realize we all (students and teachers) need these three skills for so much more than academic goals; we need them for accessing our truest selves, for surviving, thriving, and hoping during the toughest and the most human moments of our lives.

As teachers, when we advocate for the affective to have a presence in our classrooms, we provide our students with multiple chances to express their feelings, live their humanness, and explore ways of finding hope through meaningful avenues of living and learning. Without the threat of ridicule or stigmatization, students are more likely to develop

effective coping mechanisms that work for them and thrive despite struggles they face. If we show we care about students' feelings, thoughts, experiences, and cultural practices, then our students are more likely to develop hope and are more likely to choose coping mechanisms like reading, writing, and engaging in advocacy for survival. Consequentially, students are also then more likely to see the purpose of English language arts as a class of life skills used for surviving and/or thriving in challenging and/or exciting times and not just as a set of skills for school success. As my students and I have experienced firsthand, when learning explorations in ELA classrooms integrate affective components, we see the essentialness of "writ[ing] to learn, understand, and know the new truth of [our] emerging histor[ies]" (Sieben & Hultberg, 2015, p. 10) that can promise hope for our futures.

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**Nicole Sieben** is Assistant Professor of Secondary English Education at the State University of New York College at Old Westbury where she is also the coordinator for the graduate programs in English education. A former high school English teacher in New York, Sieben’s research focuses on building “writing hope” in secondary and postsecondary education, social justice practices, and professional development in K-12 schools.