On November 11, English teachers across the state gathered for the Utah Council of Teachers of English conference at the Jordan Commons Megaplex Theatre in Sandy, Utah. A number of USU students were also able to attend, including many of those in Professor Rivera-Mueller's Teaching Young Adult Literature and Teaching Literature classes.

Alan Sitomer was the first speaker of the conference, addressing all 200+ attendees. His presentation addressed a myriad of issues concerning teachers today, including the huge decrease in students’ attention span in recent years, largely due to the prevalence of technology in their lives. He acknowledged the dangers of assumptive teaching and how damaging that can be to our defense of student focus. According to Sitomer, we need to address the fundamentals with our students and encourage genuine engagement in our classrooms. He believes engagement can be achieved by understanding the real reason we teach literature. Sitomer said, “We read not to discover who others are, but who we are.” The culmination of Sitomer’s lecture was simply to trust yourself as an educator. Teachers do not have to wait for permission to serve students using the best methods they know.

Following Sitomer’s presentation, the attendees chose from a variety of breakout sessions to attend. A fellow student and I made our way to Gaylynn Parker’s lecture entitled, “Empowering Students as Writers Through Effective Collaboration.” Parker spoke about the benefits of using mediums besides plain text to teach students how to think and write effectively. Using pictures, videos, and other means can help broaden student’s minds before being introduced to more intense textual methods. She also spoke on the benefits of having students evaluate their own writing instead of relying solely on teacher critique. The next breakout session brought some fellow students and I to a presentation led by Chris Crowe, Joseph Wiederhold, and Dawan Coombs, entitled “Staying Fired Up to Avoid Burning Out.” They spoke on the benefits of pursuing your own writing as a teacher; it refreshes your perspective and allows you to bring new things to the table as an educator.

The second keynote speaker at the conference was Sarah Brown Wessling, recipient of the National Teacher of the Year Award in 2010. Her hour-long presentation was titled “The Let-Go That Gets More: Creating Cultures of Learning” and covered the topic of creating a flourishing learning environment. She spoke about the difference between task and purpose; while we need to have our students doing things in our classrooms, we need to know if the tasks are going to get us where we want to go. Wessling also emphasized the need to look at the students in front of you and see what you are willing to adjust in your classroom to reach them. As educators, we need to open to adjustments. We need strategies in our classrooms, but we also need to be strategic with them. Her presentation was extremely inspiring. She reminded us that it’s ok if things go wrong; we can learn from that and adjust from those mistakes.

The last breakout session took us to Lorraine Wallace’s presentation on “Designing Lessons the Fair Way.” Her main takeaway point was “students deserve a good teacher not by chance, but by design.” Teachers are responsible for communicating their objectives and helping students learn.

The 2016 UCTE Conference held so much importance and inspiration for both current and future educators. All of the presenters expressed their belief and optimism in the profession of teaching. Teaching is one of the most important occupations, and the conference reminded all of the attendees how much influence they truly have and all the good they can do.

Article by: Mackenzie Christensen, USU English Major
From Left to Right:
Top Row (Jamie Finch, Codi Powell, Julia Stock, Rebecca Elliott) Middle Row (McKenzie Draper, Cassidy Bone, Justin Vance, Amanda Siler) Bottom Row (Jessica Rivera-Mueller, Samantha Child, Mackenzie Christensen, Morgan Sanford, Miranda Day, Brandon Johnson)